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von Flotow et al.

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(54) **ROTORCRAFT-ASSISTED SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR LAUNCHING AND RETRIEVING A FIXED-WING AIRCRAFT INTO AND FROM FREE FLIGHT**

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC ... B64D 5/00; B64D 3/00; B64D 3/02; B64D 1/12; B64D 1/22; B64C 39/022; B64C 2201/182; B64C 2201/082
See application file for complete search history.

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(73) Assignee: **Hood Technology Corporation**, Hood River, OR (US)

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(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 525 days.

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Primary Examiner — Brian M O'Hara

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

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Related U.S. Application Data

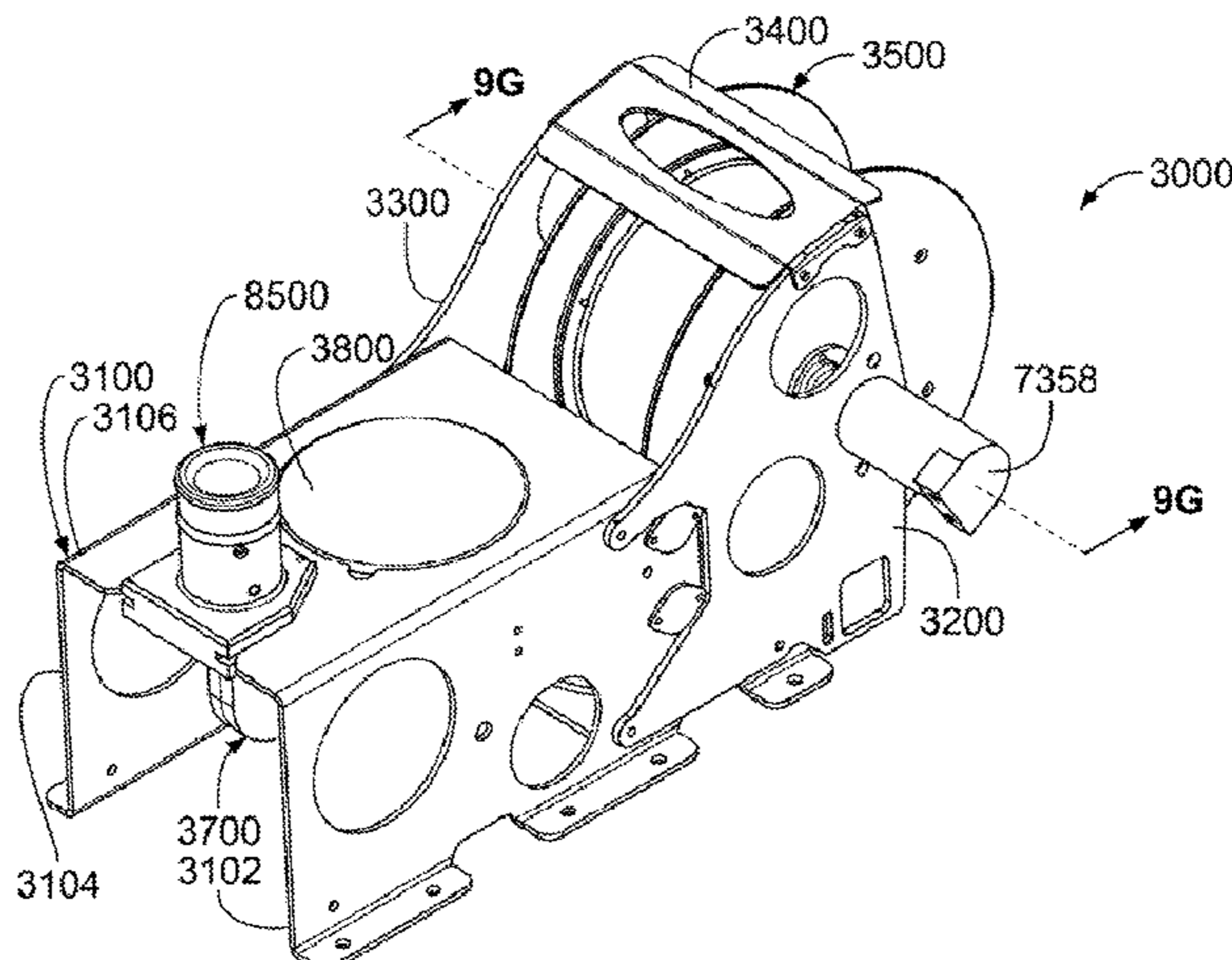
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(51) **Int. Cl.**
B64C 39/02 (2006.01)
B64F 1/02 (2006.01)
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

Various embodiments of the present disclosure provide a rotorcraft-assisted system and method for launching and retrieving a fixed-wing aircraft into and from free flight. The launch and retrieval system includes a modular multicopter, a storage and launch system, an anchor system, a flexible capture member, and an aircraft-landing structure. The multicopter is attachable to the fixed-wing aircraft to facilitate launching the fixed-wing aircraft into free, wing-borne flight. The storage and launch system is usable to store the multicopter (when disassembled) and to act as a launch mount for the fixed-wing aircraft by retaining the fixed-wing aircraft in a desired launch orientation. The anchor system is usable with the multicopter, the flexible capture member,
(Continued)

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and the aircraft-landing structure to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft from free, wing-borne flight.

4 Claims, 84 Drawing Sheets

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F15B 9/14 (2006.01)
F15B 13/02 (2006.01)
F15B 1/02 (2006.01)
F15B 13/04 (2006.01)
F15B 1/26 (2006.01)

- (52) **U.S. Cl.**
 CPC *F15B 1/26* (2013.01); *F15B 9/14* (2013.01); *F15B 13/024* (2013.01); *F15B 13/0417* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/027* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/084* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/104* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/108* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/148* (2013.01); *B64C 2201/182* (2013.01); *B65H 2403/93* (2013.01); *B65H 2404/40* (2013.01); *B65H 2404/742* (2013.01); *B65H 2701/30* (2013.01); *F15B 2201/51* (2013.01)

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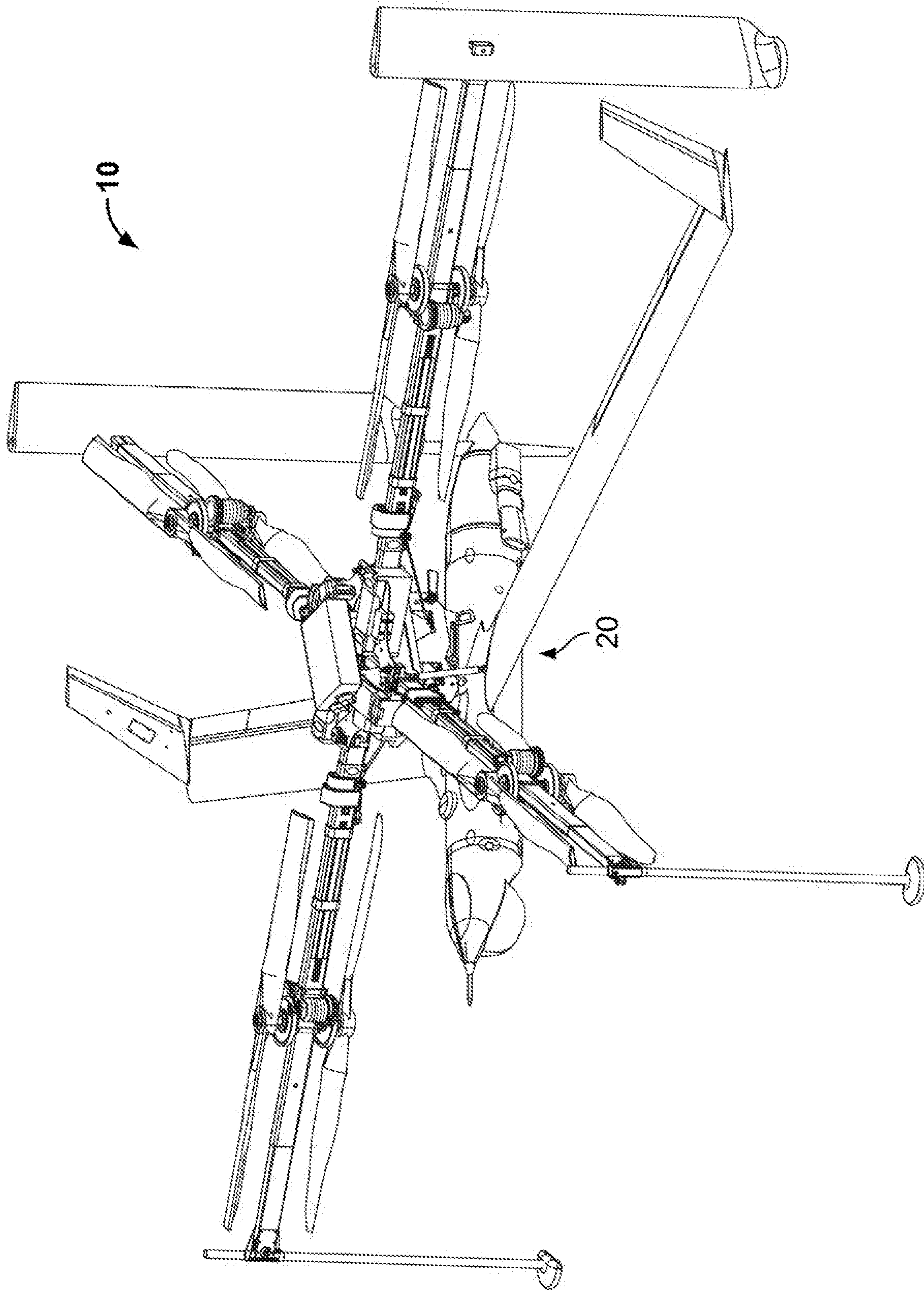


FIG. 1A

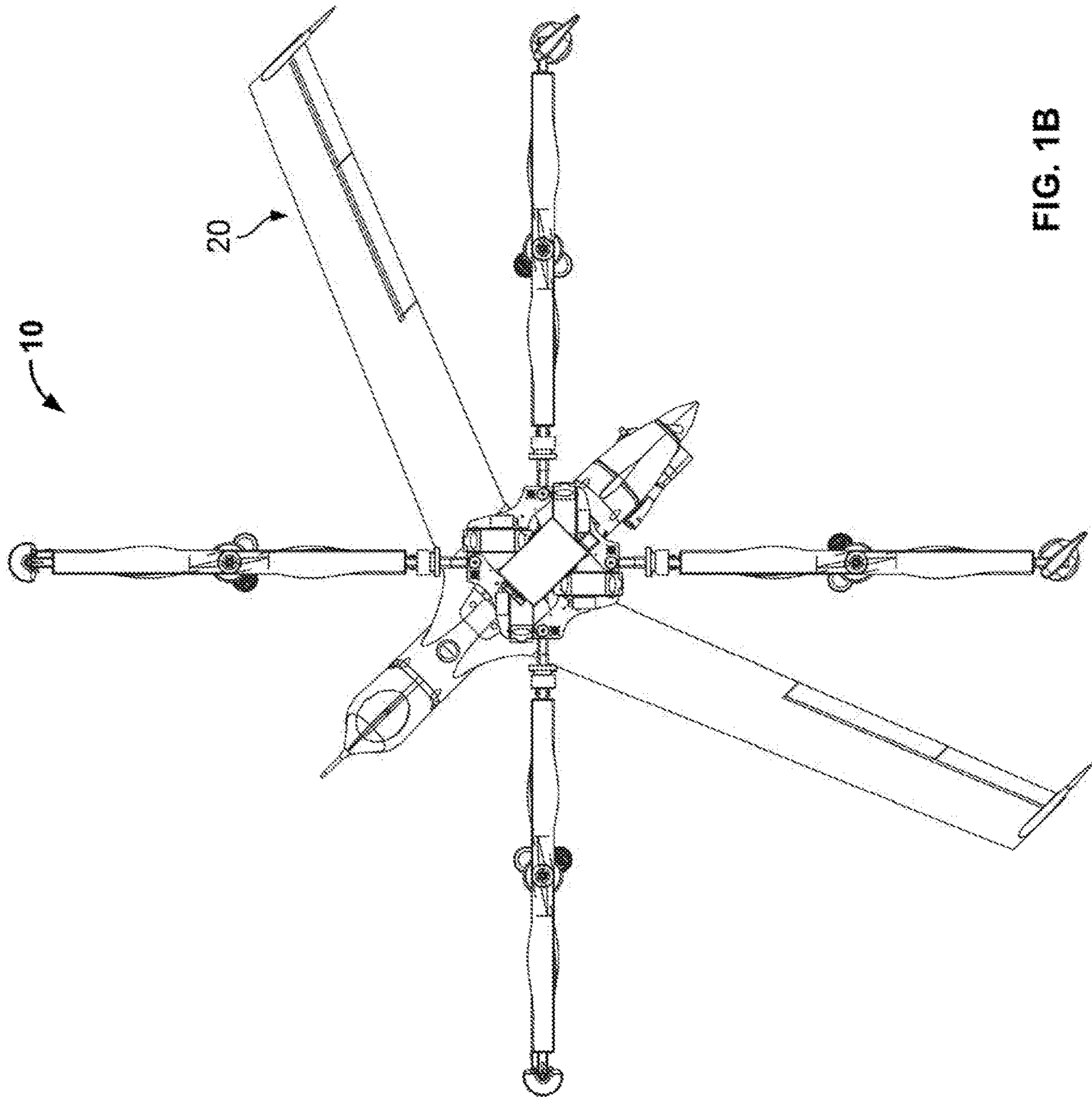


FIG. 1B

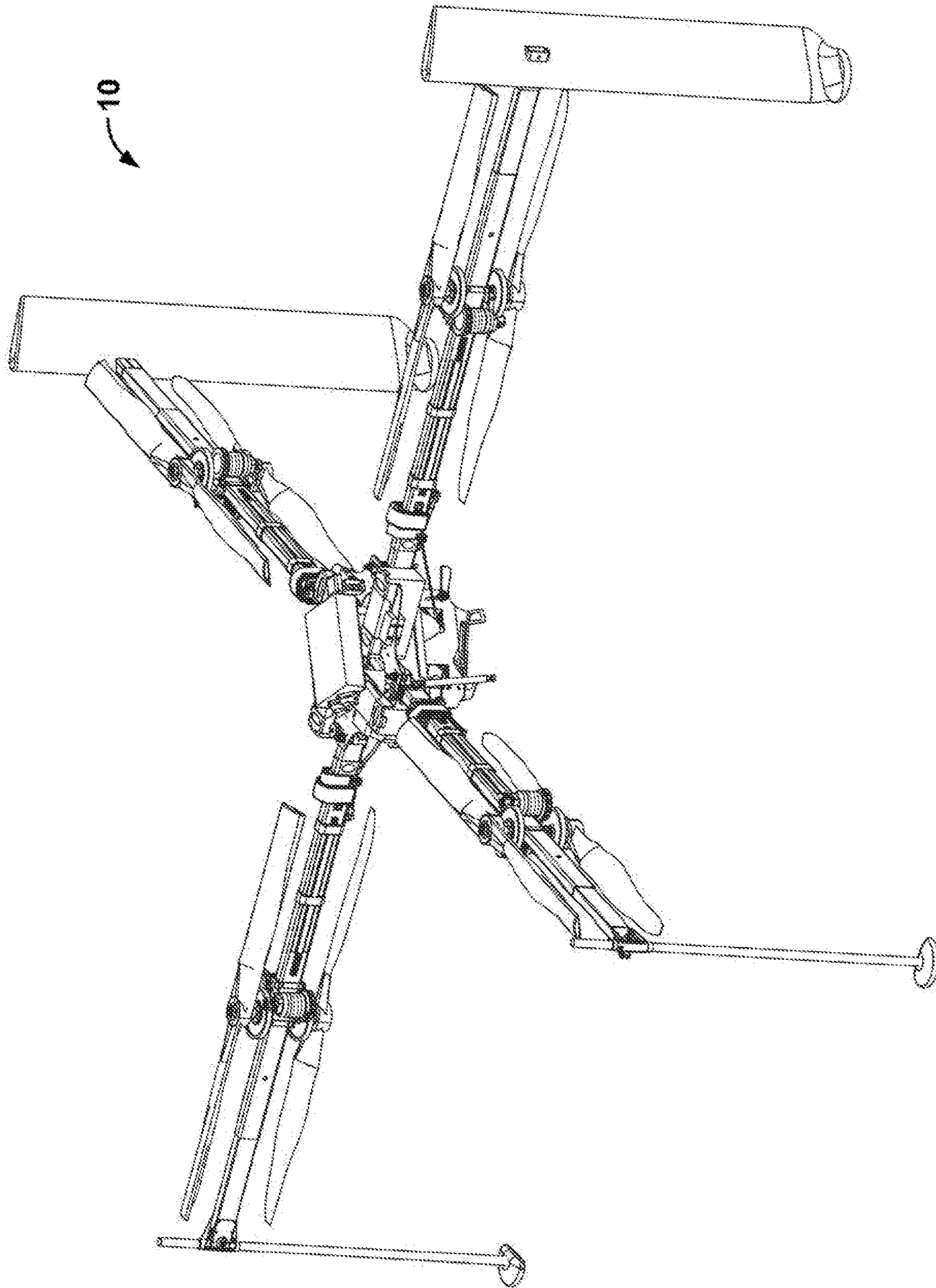


FIG. 1C

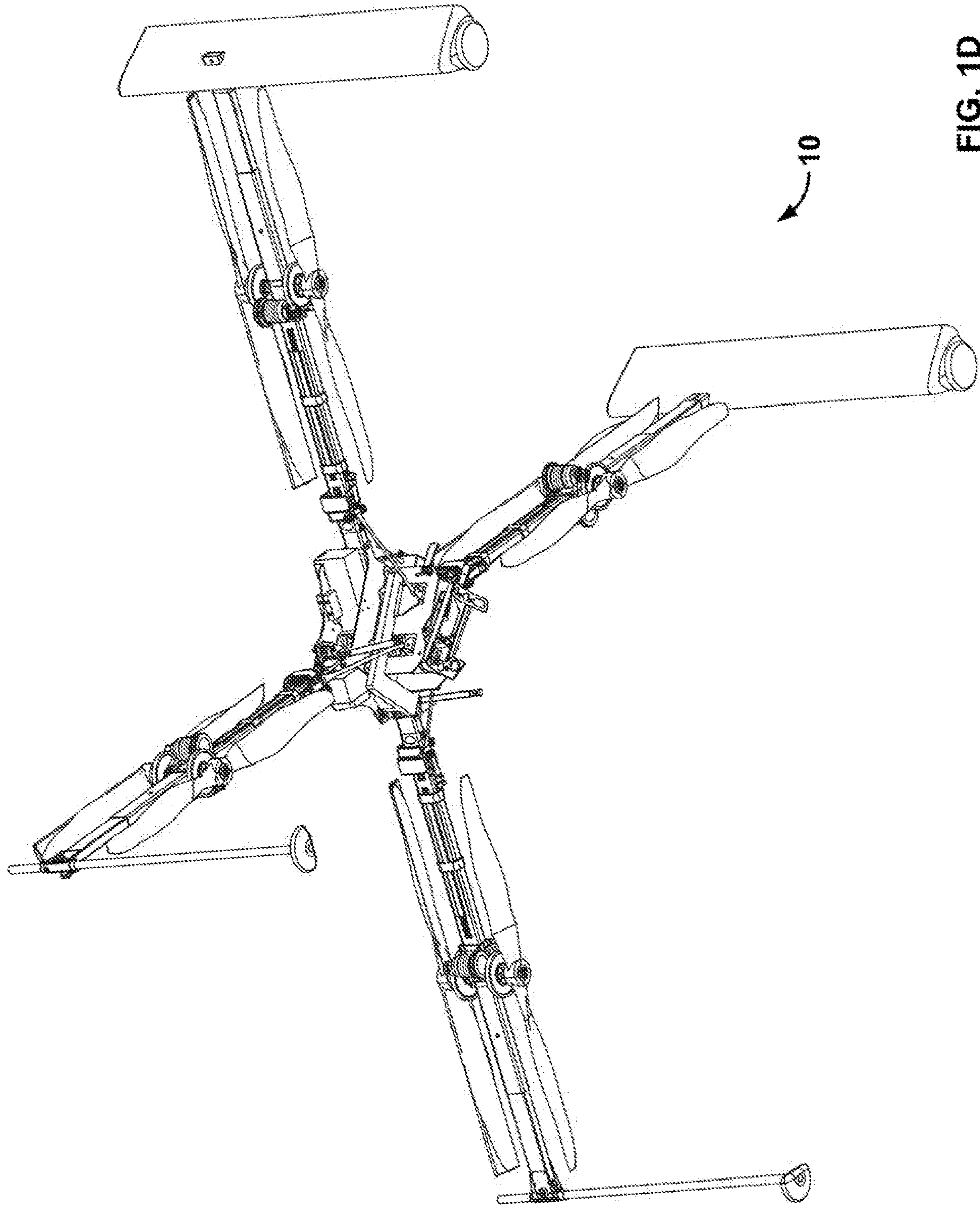


FIG. 1D

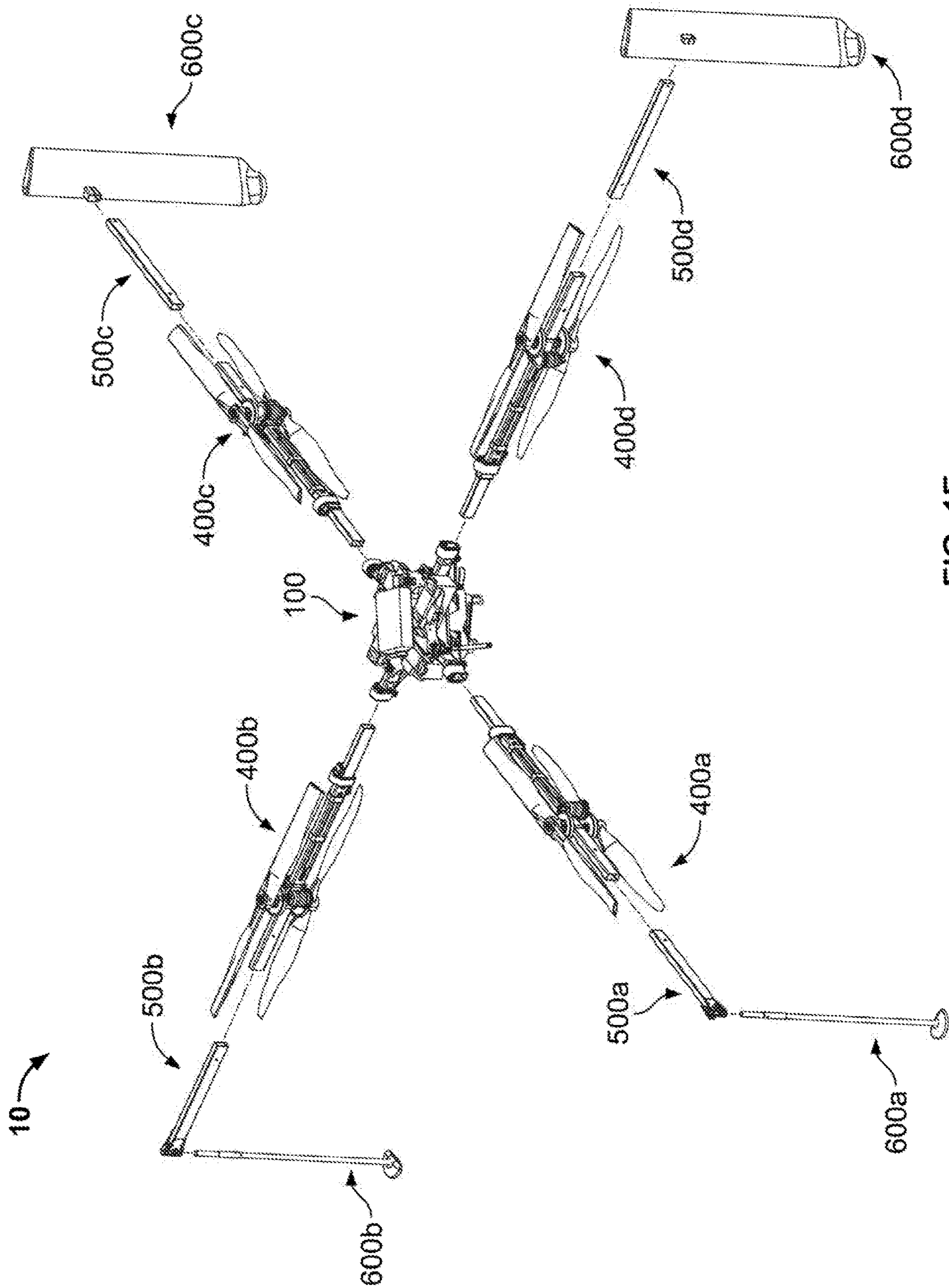


FIG. 1E

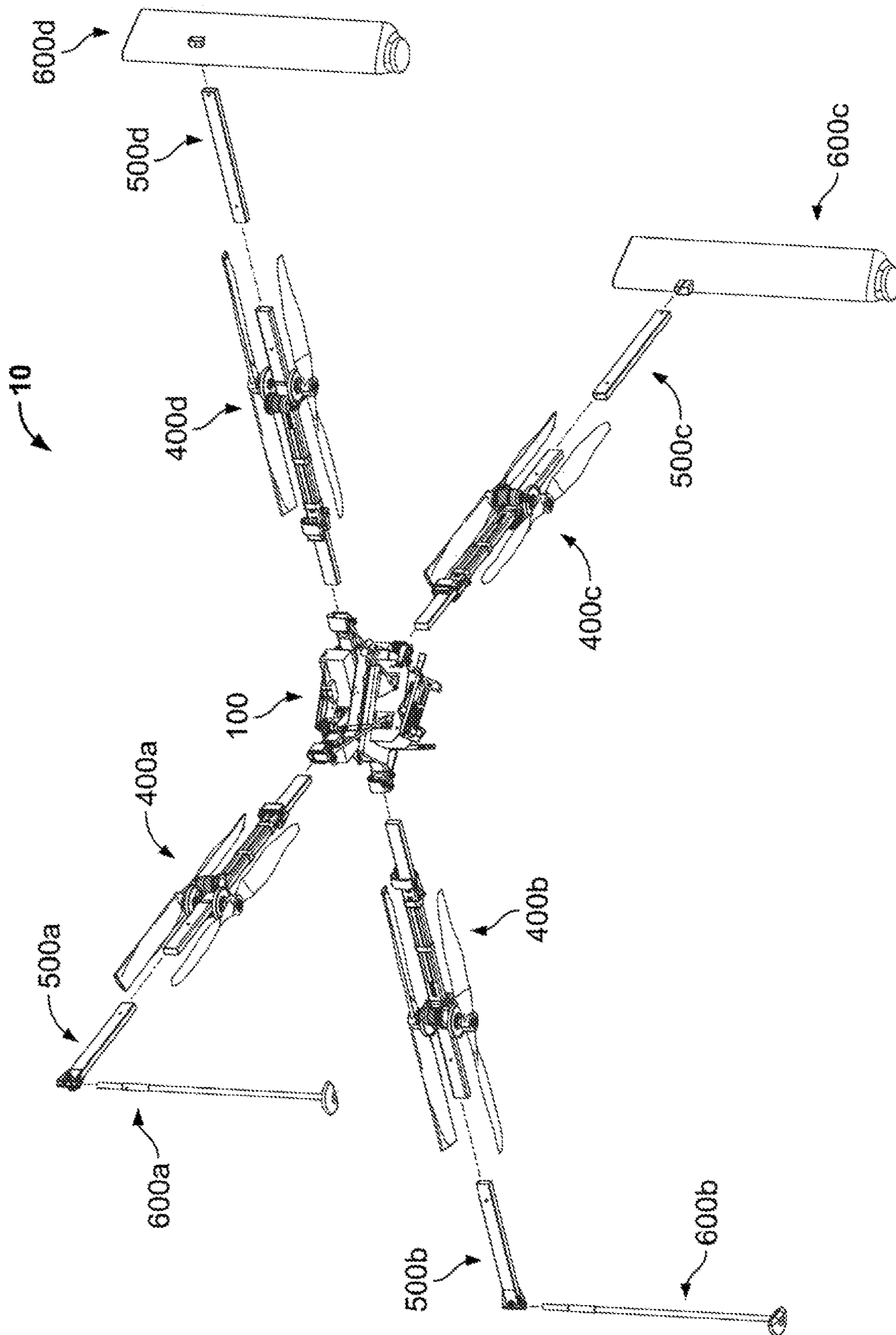


FIG. 1F

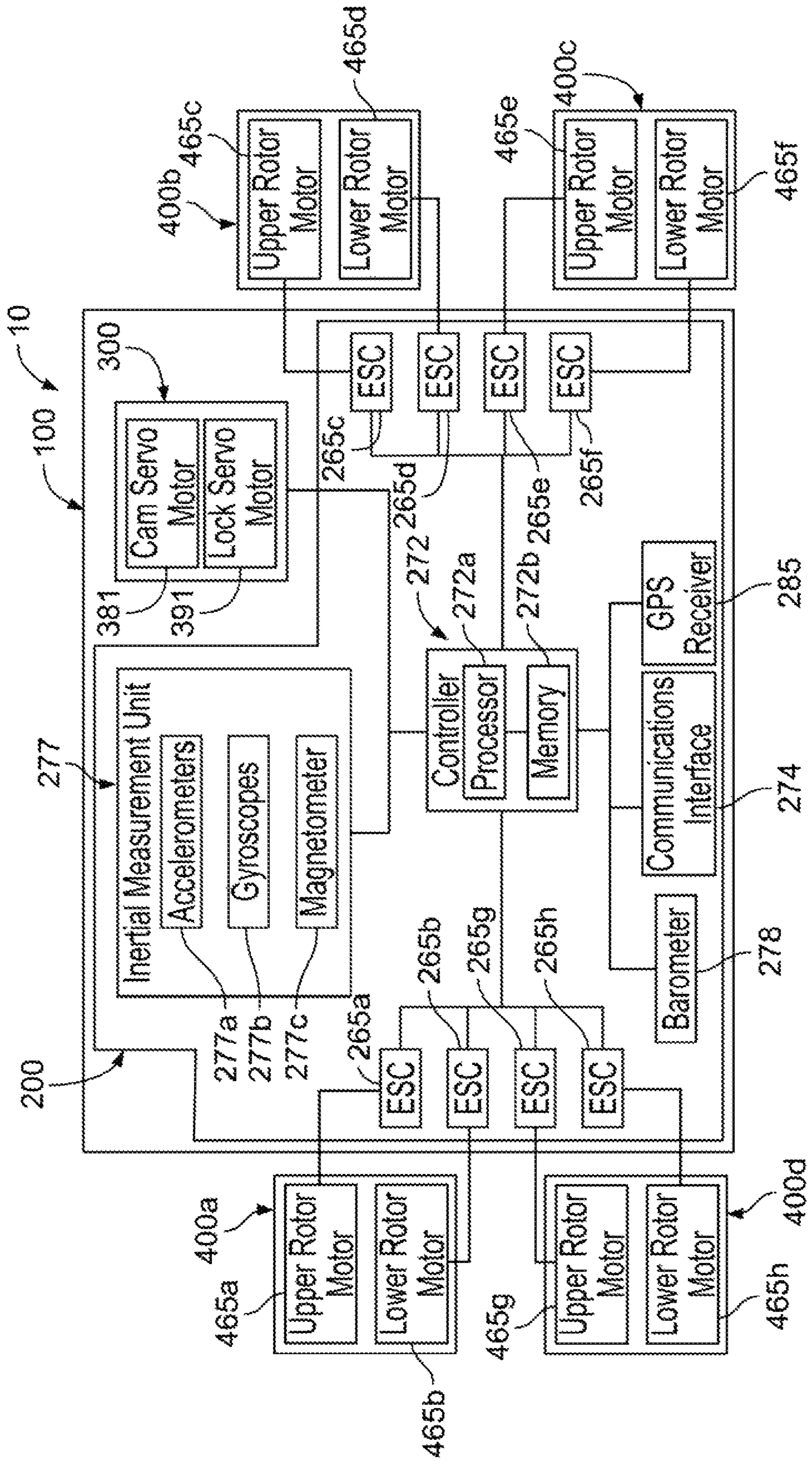


FIG. 1G

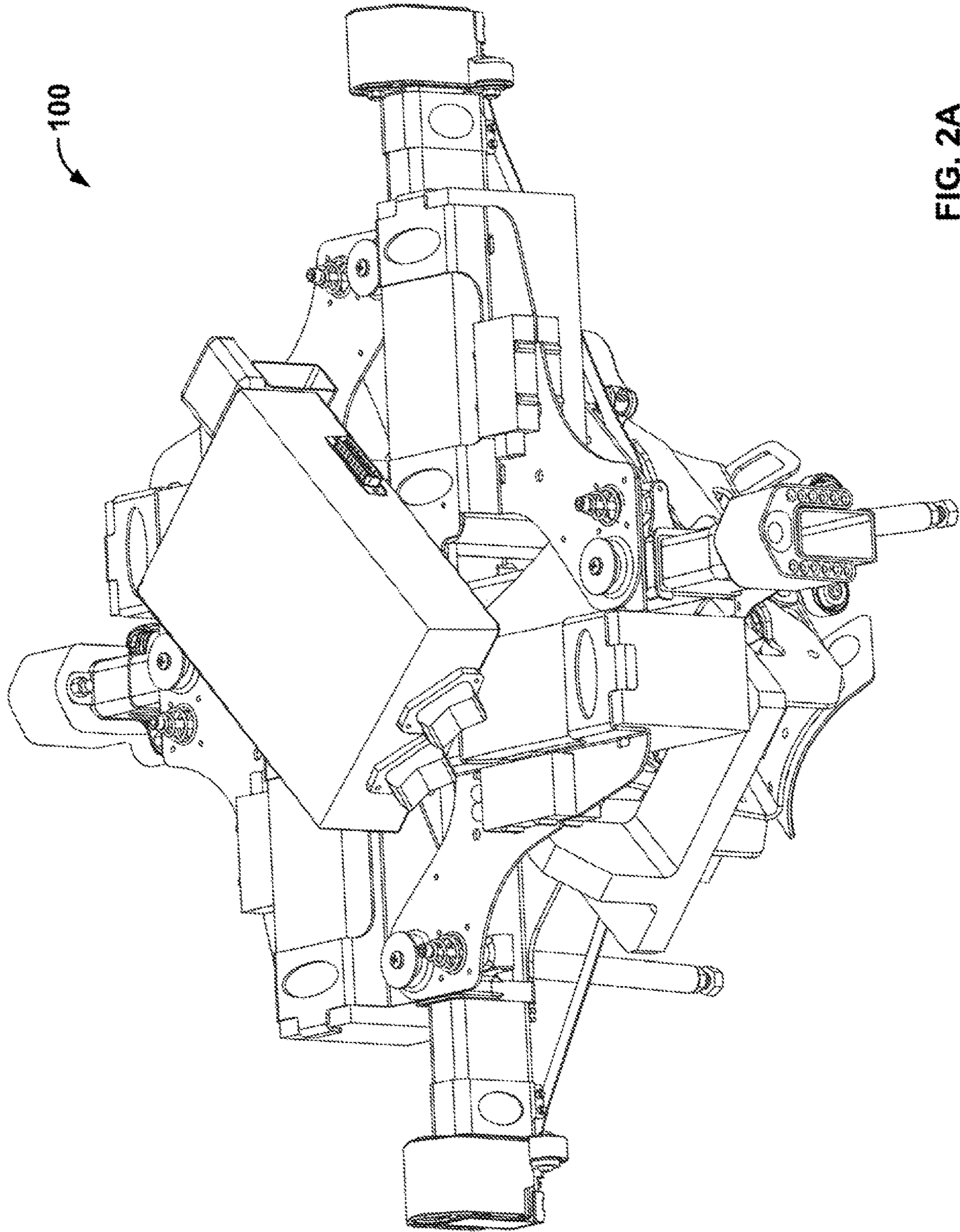


FIG. 2A

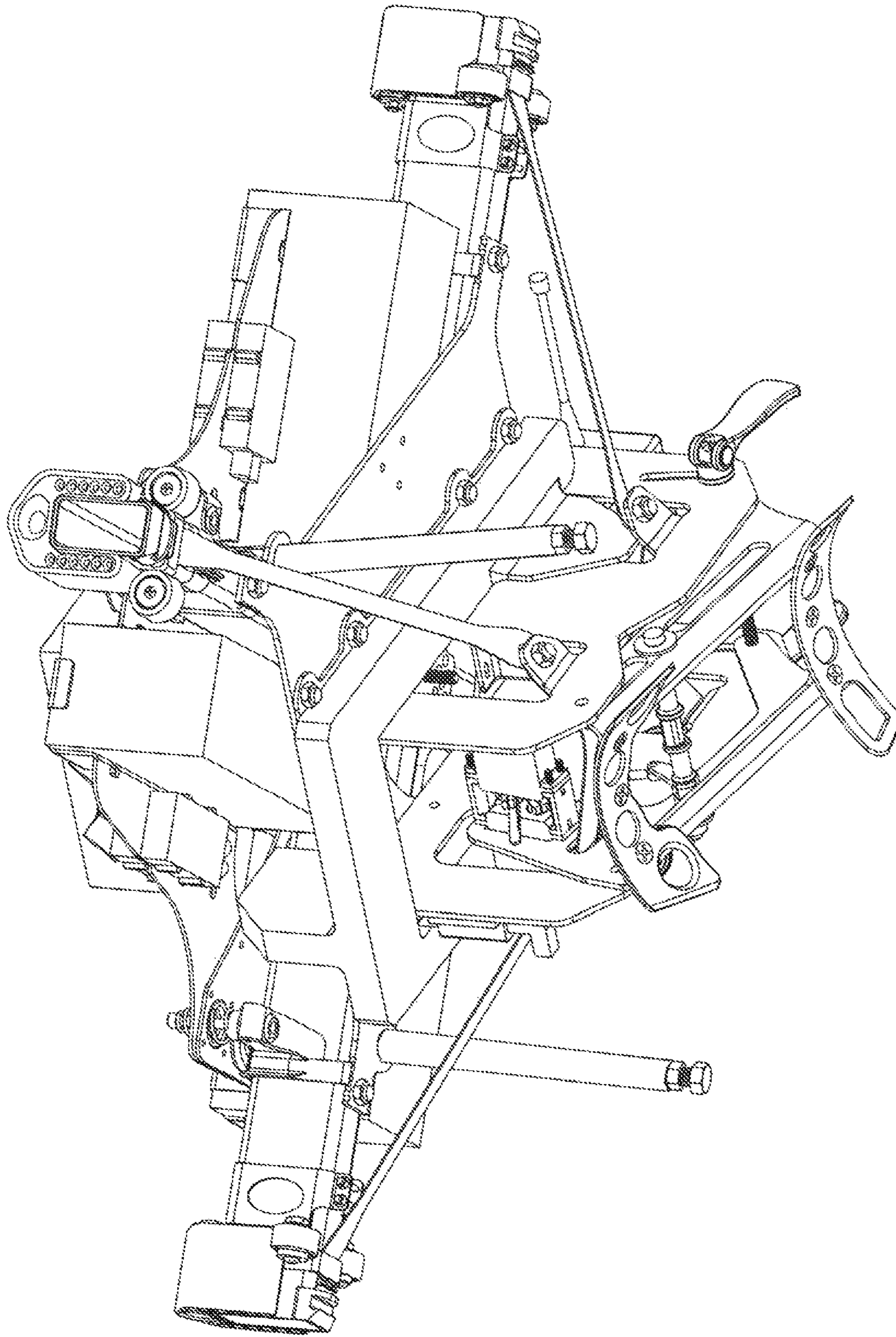


FIG. 2B

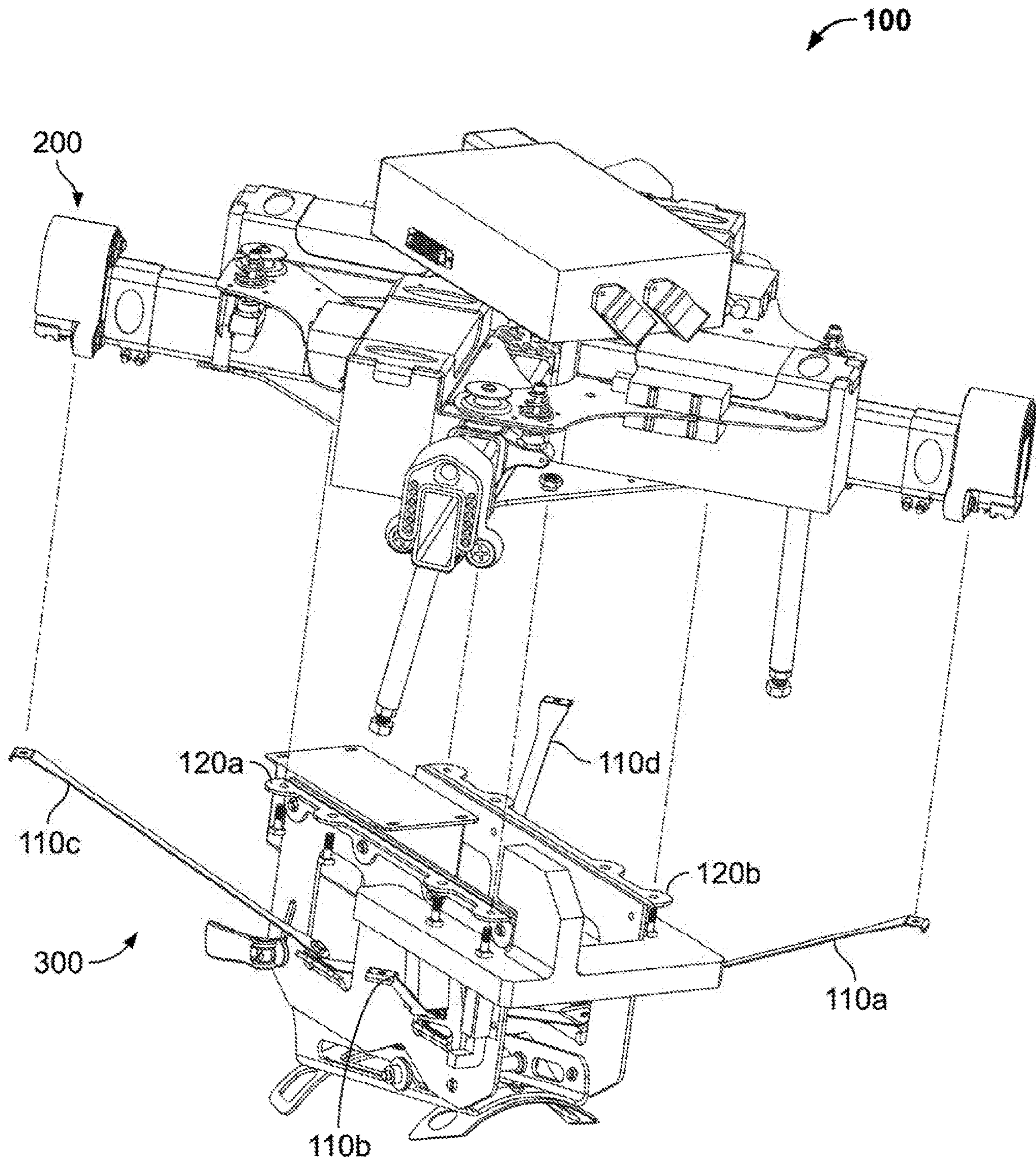


FIG. 2C

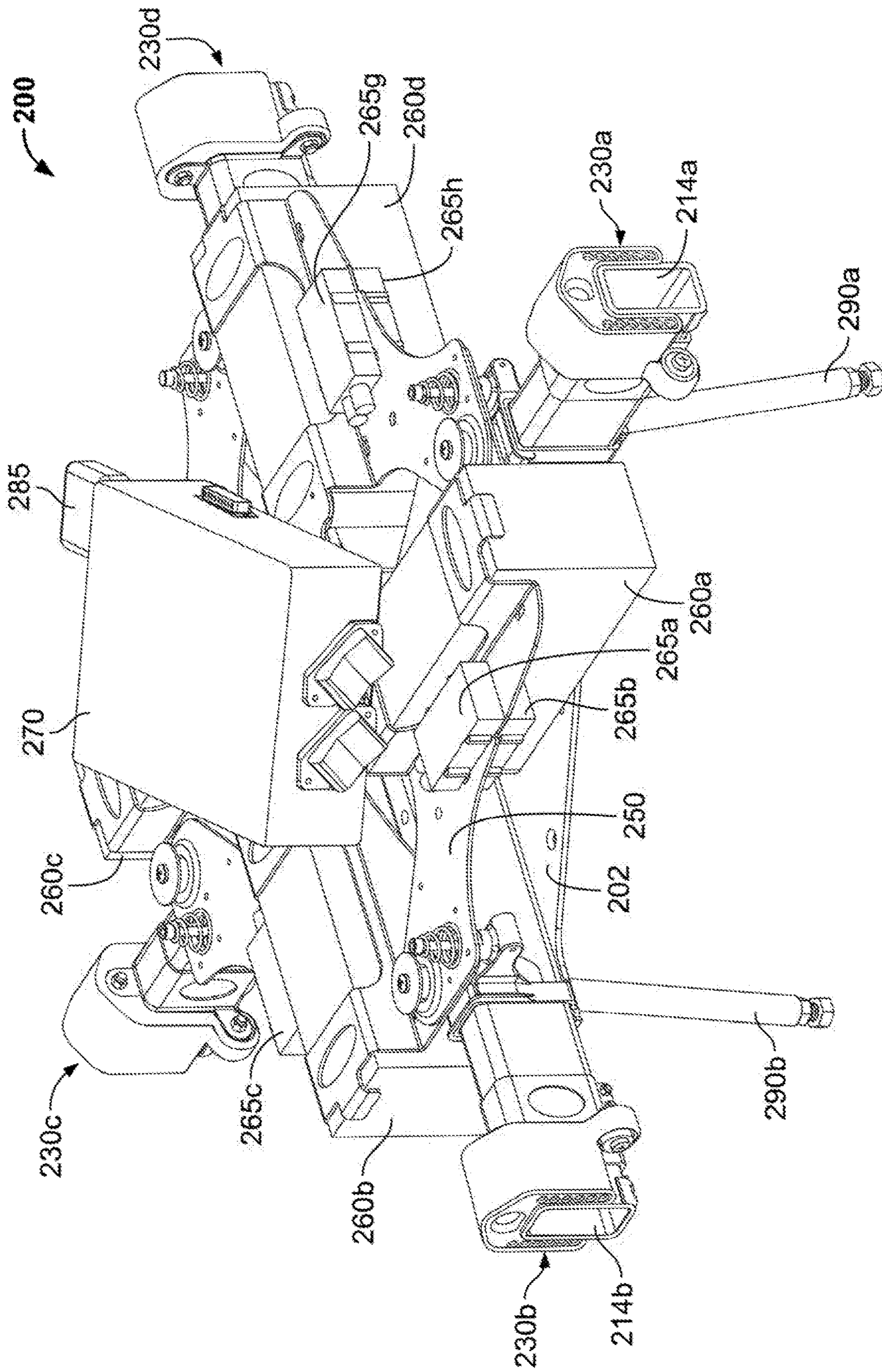


FIG. 3A

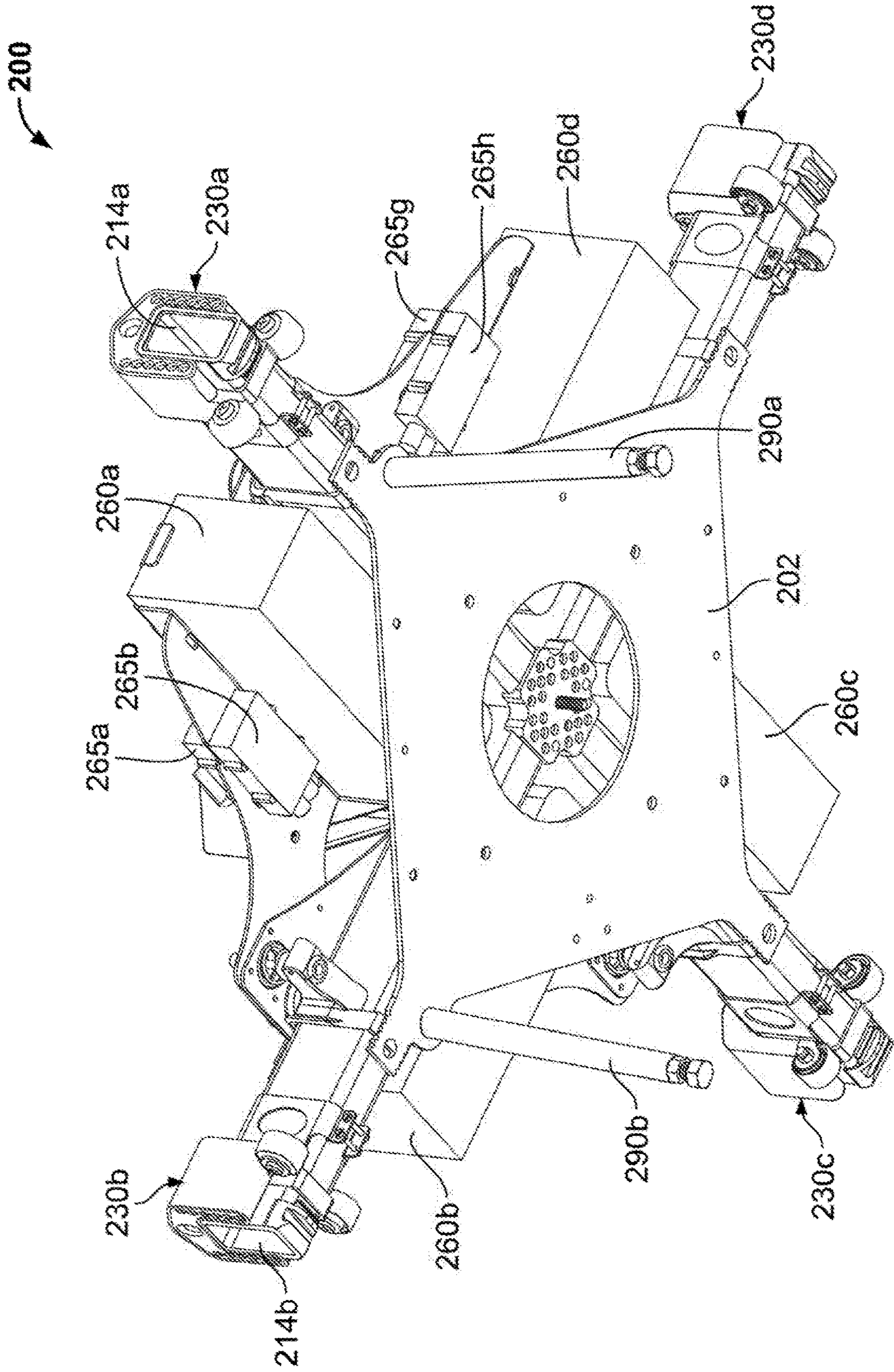


FIG. 3B

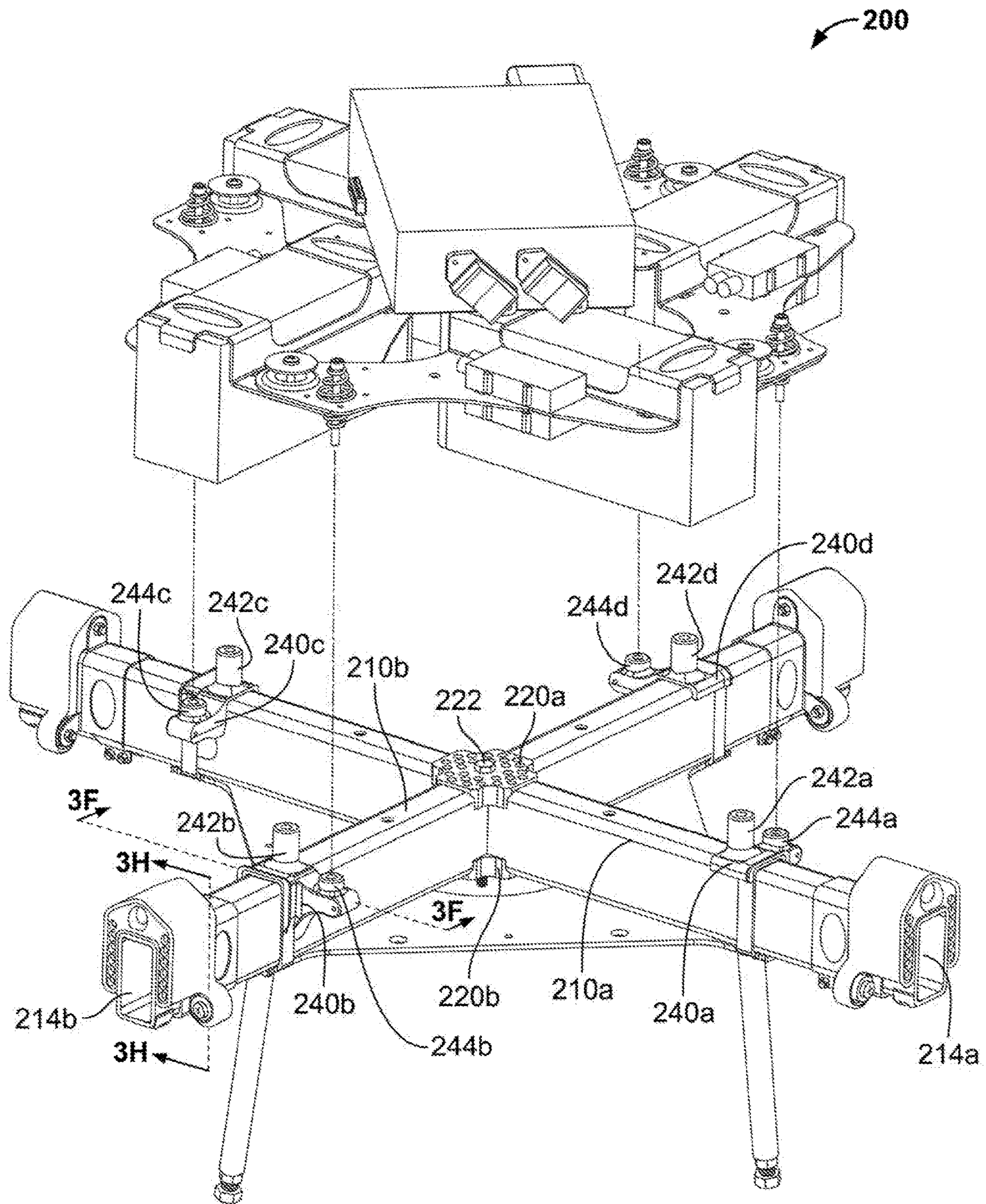


FIG. 3C

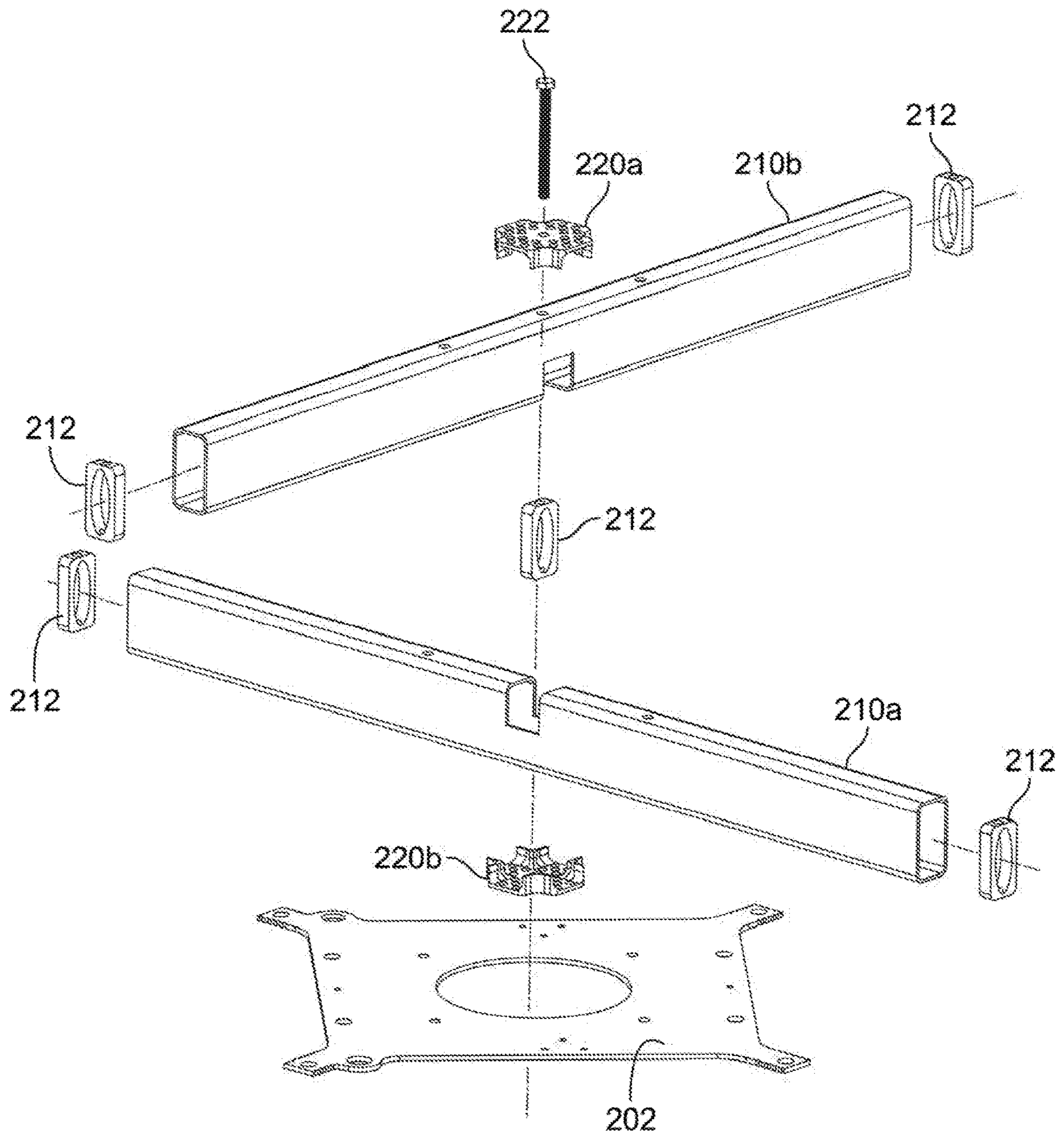


FIG. 3D

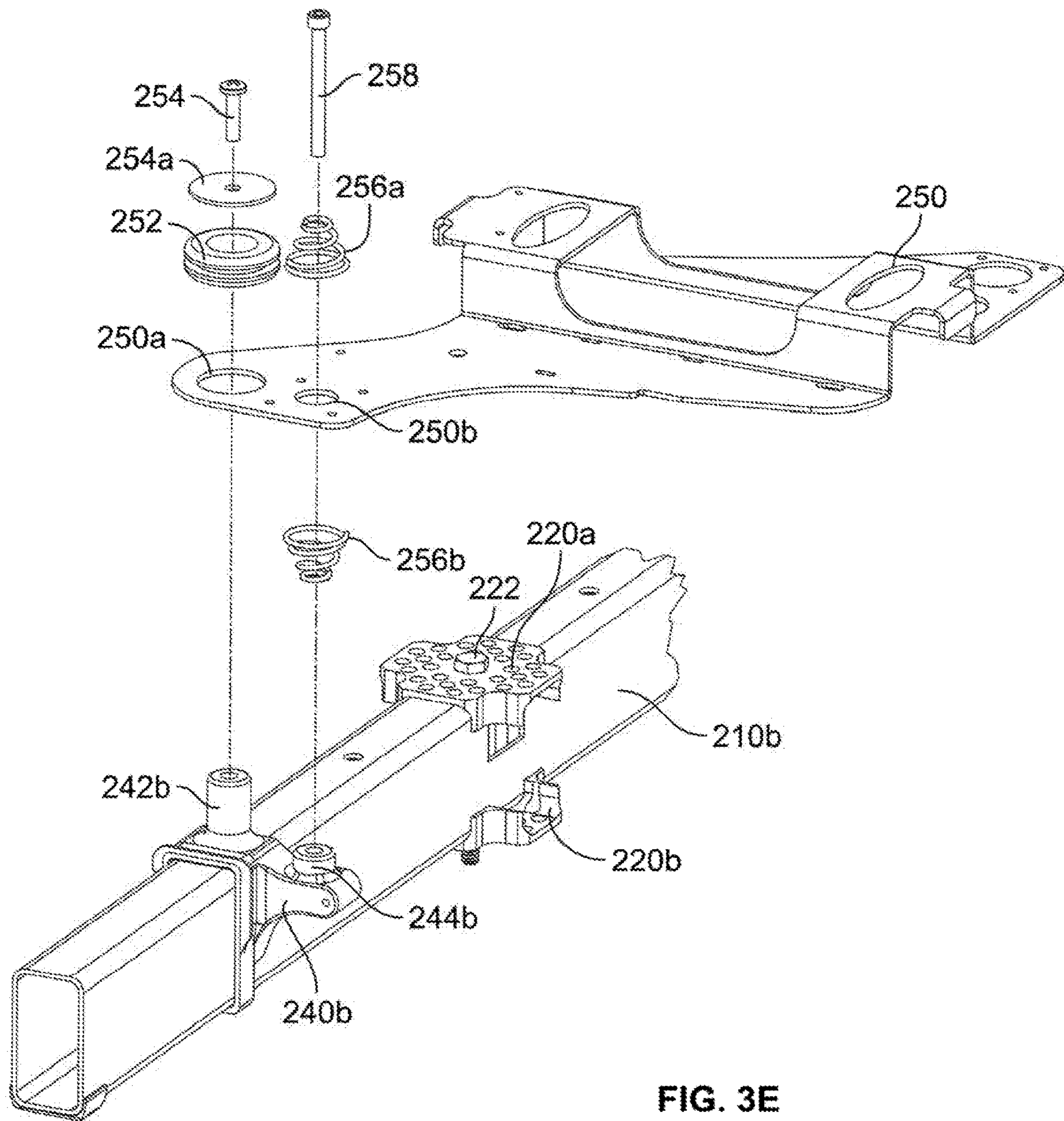


FIG. 3E

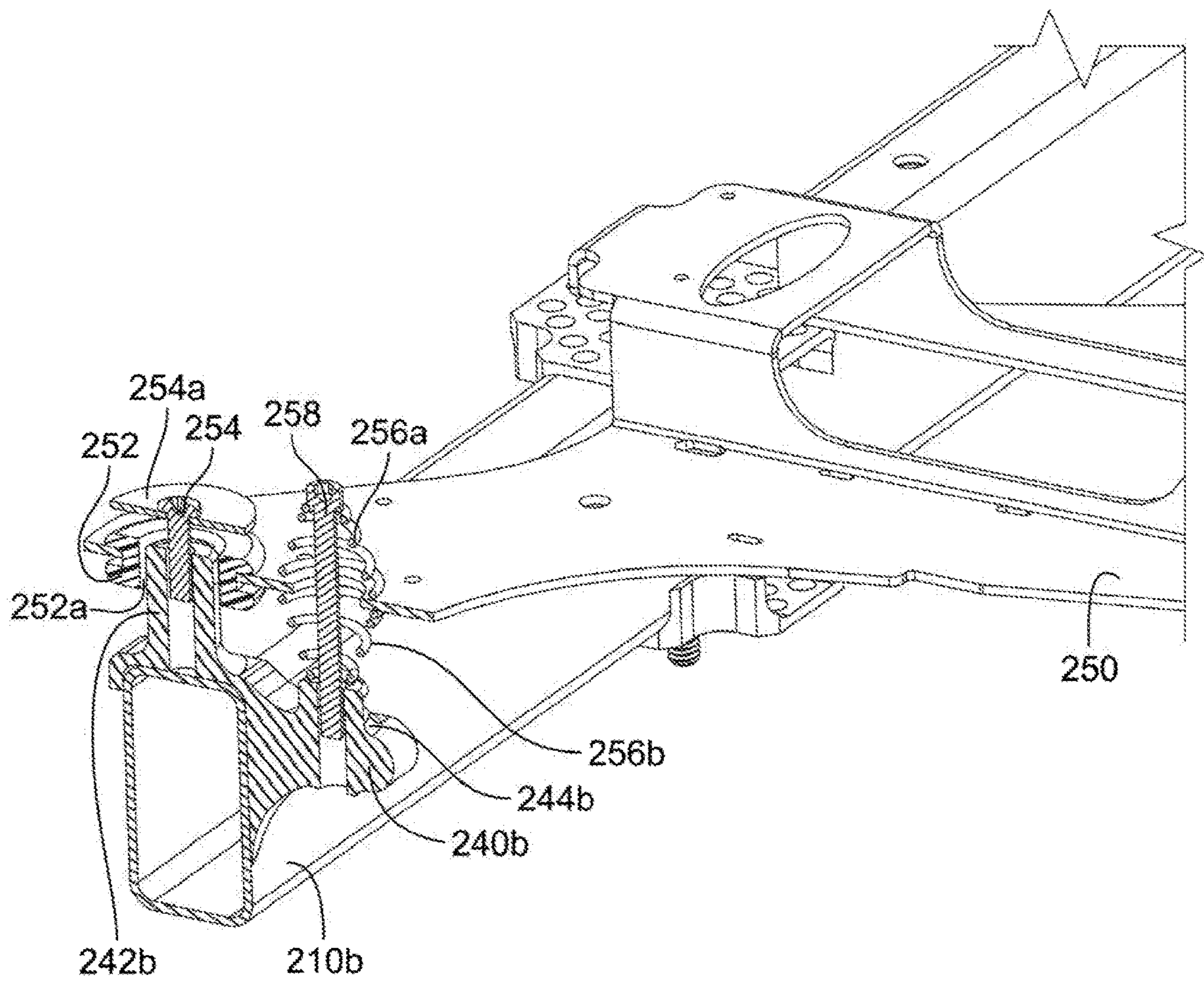


FIG. 3F

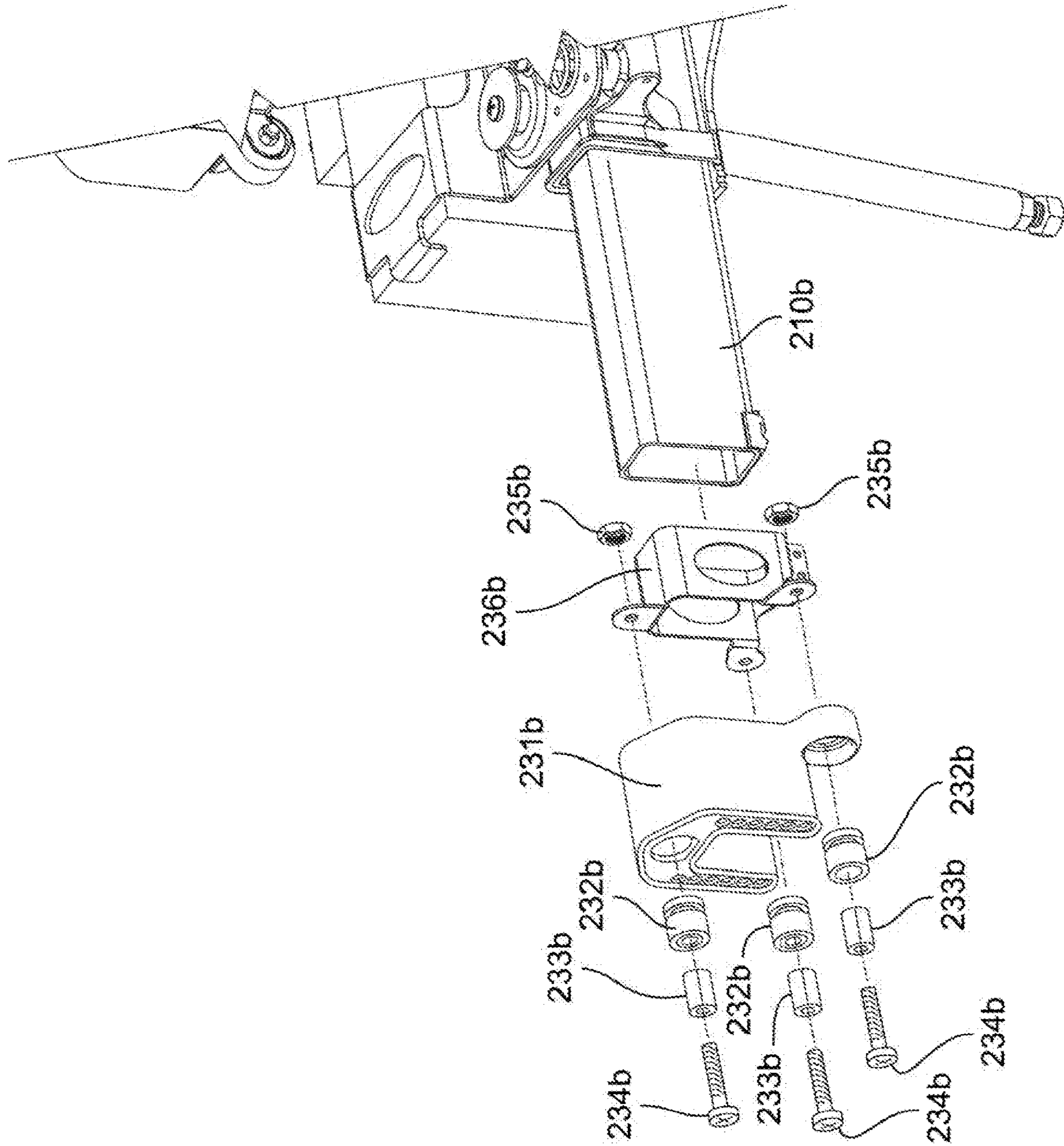


FIG. 3G

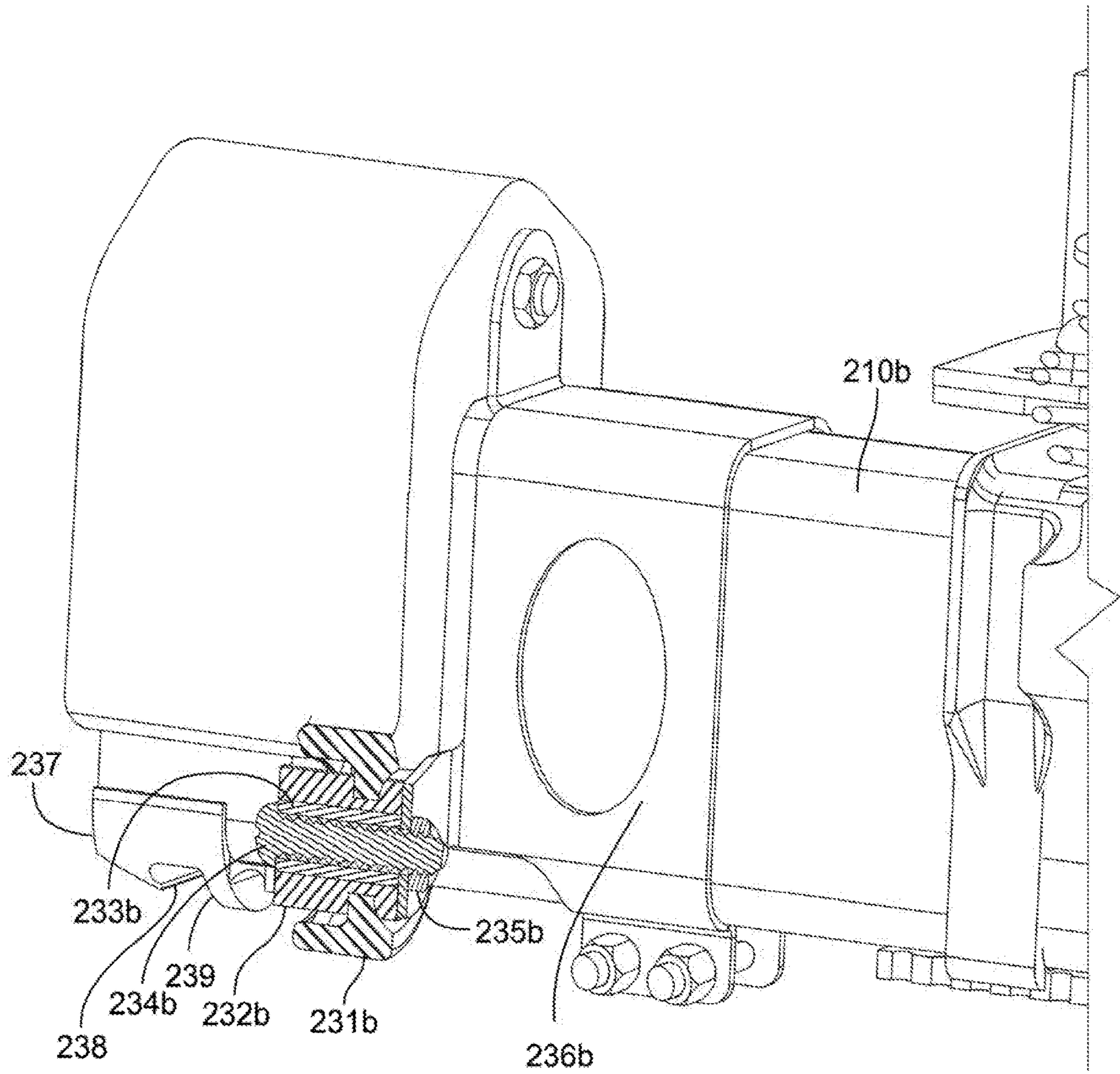


FIG. 3H

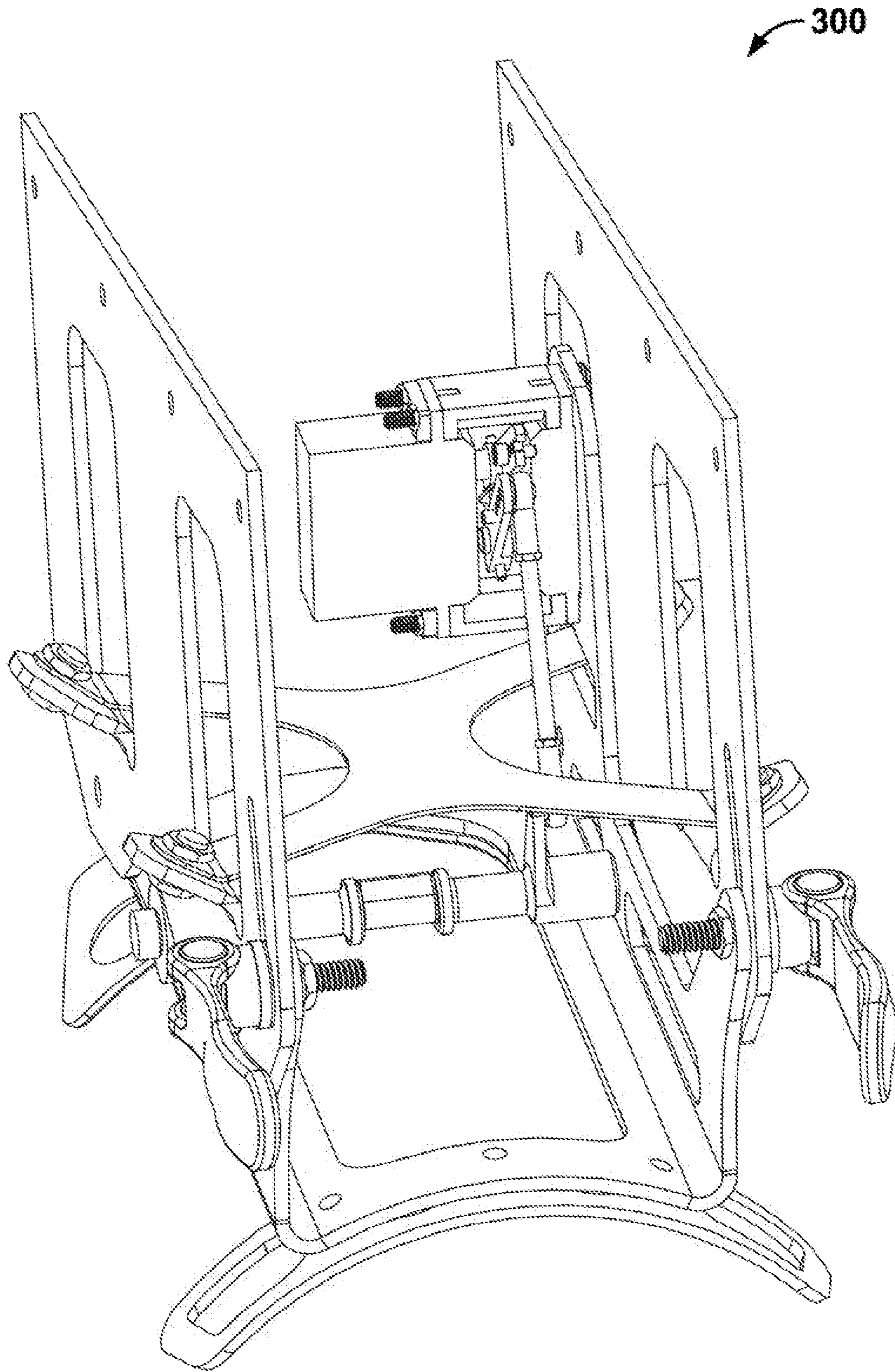


FIG. 4A

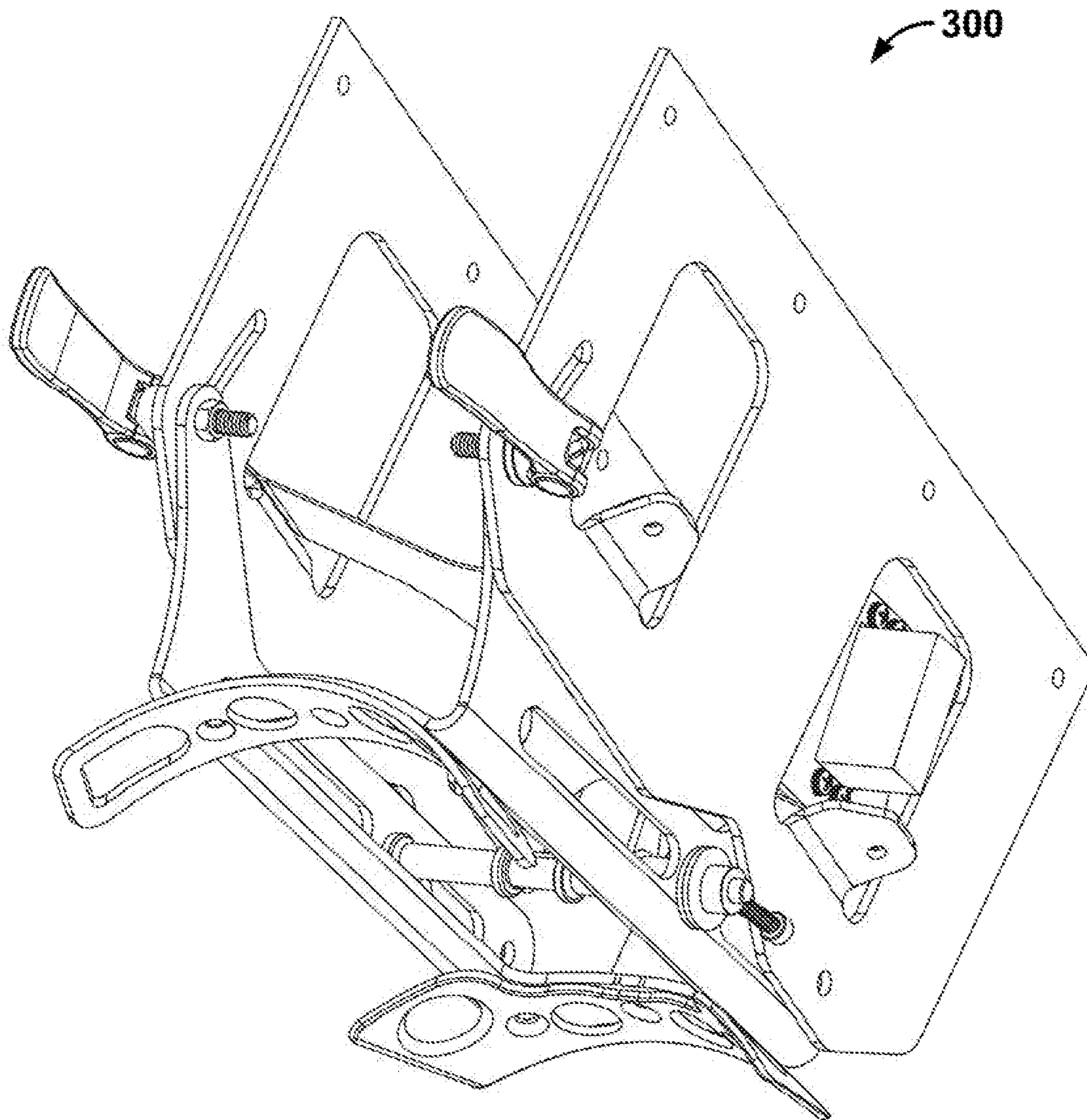


FIG. 4B

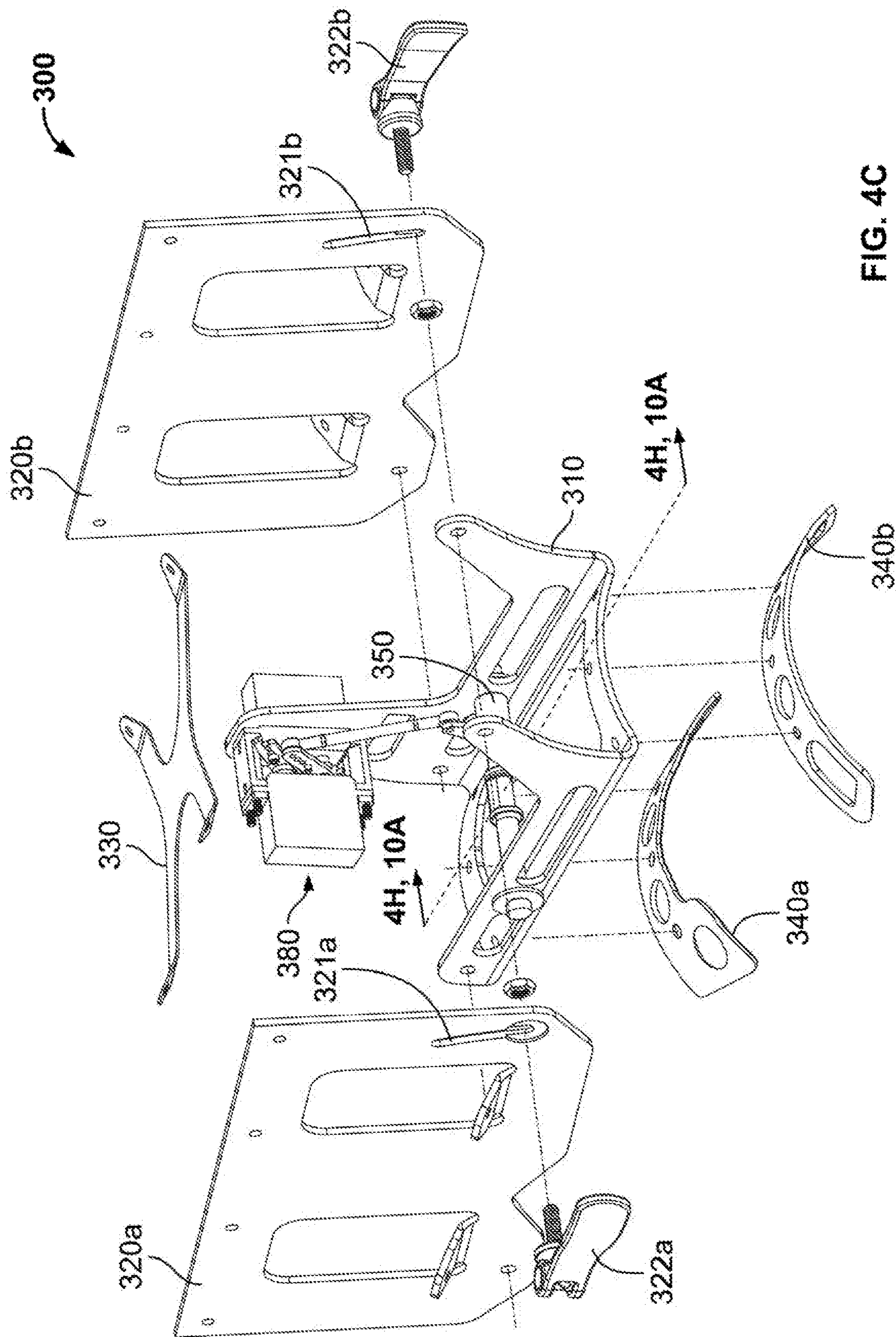
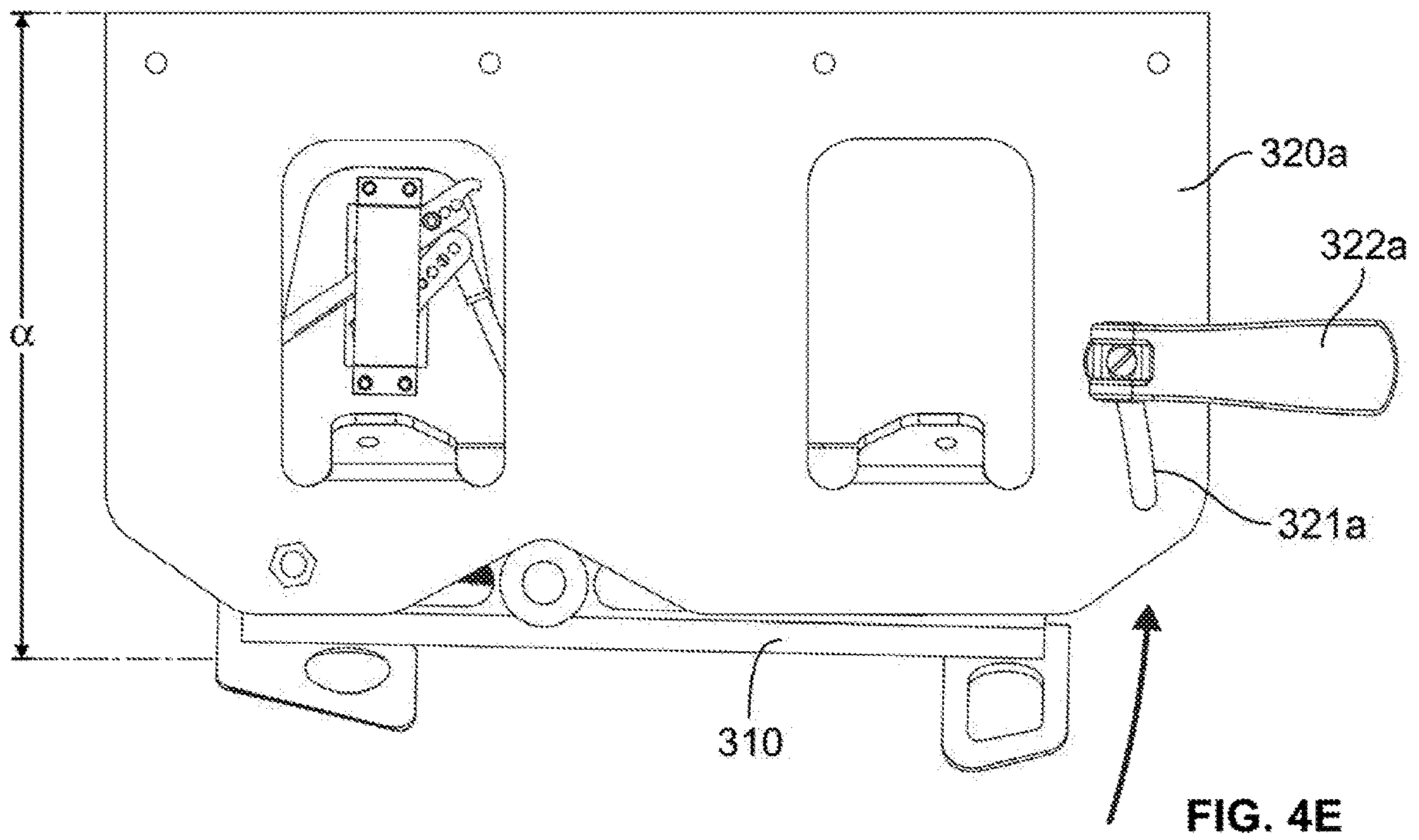
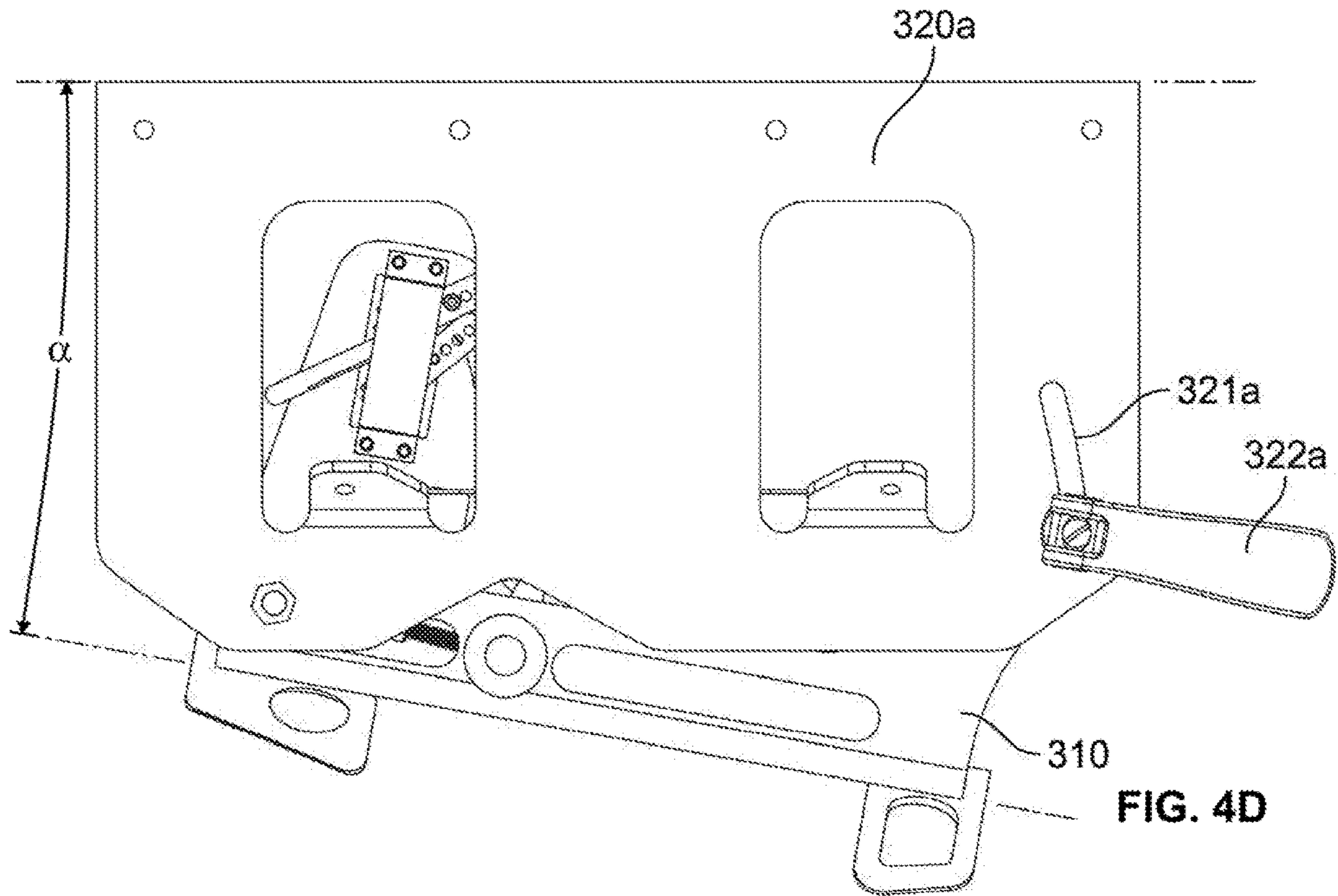


FIG. 4C



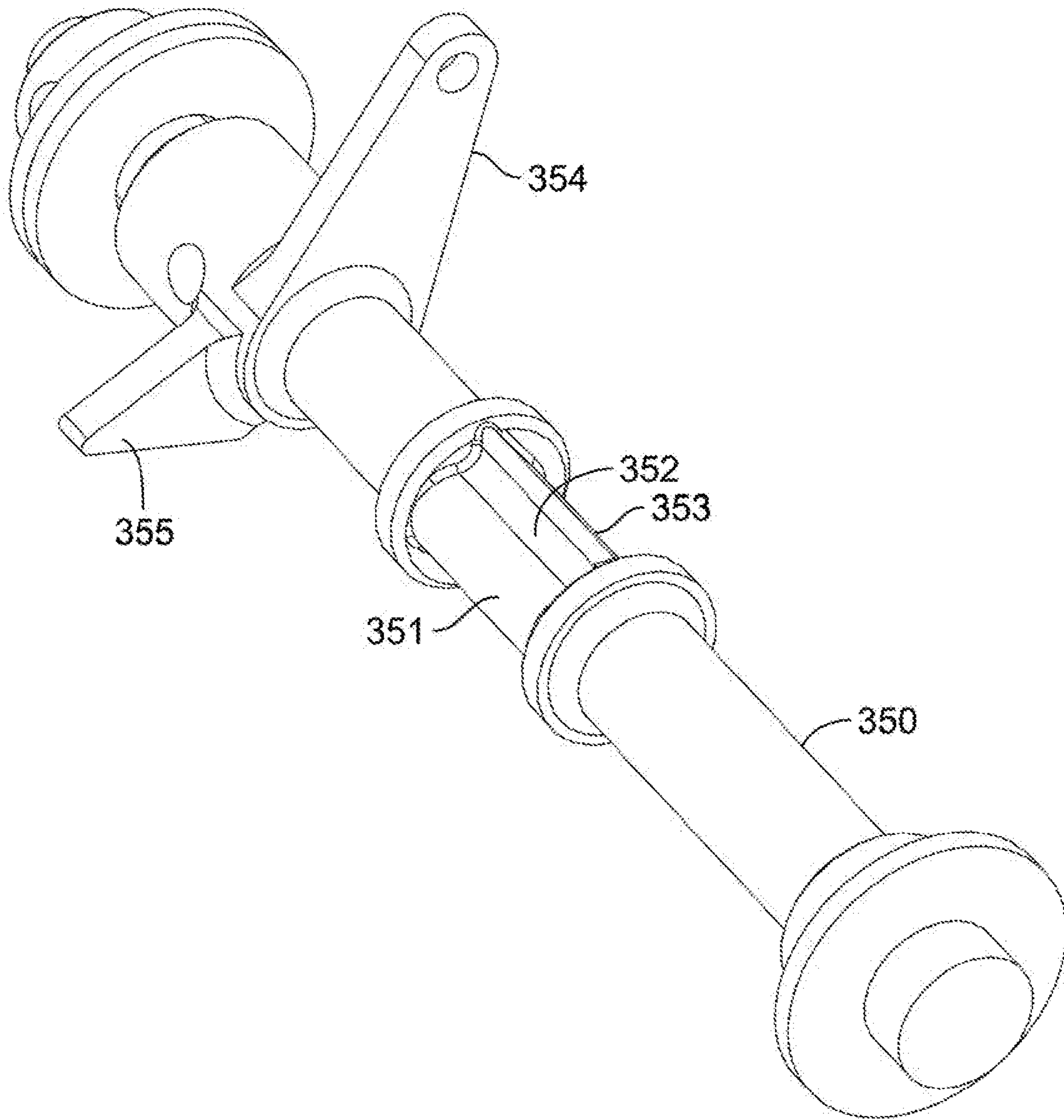


FIG. 4F

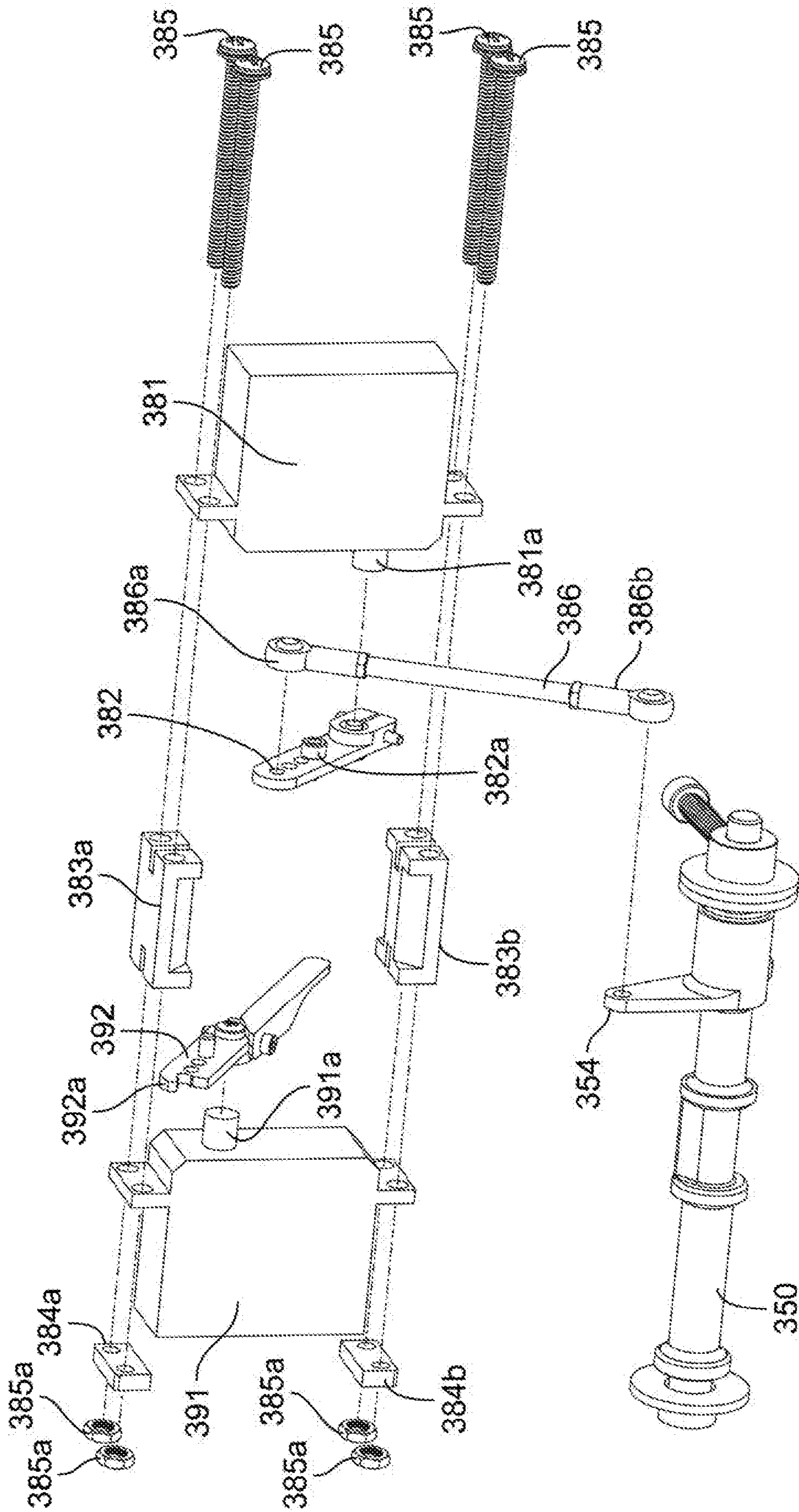


FIG. 4G

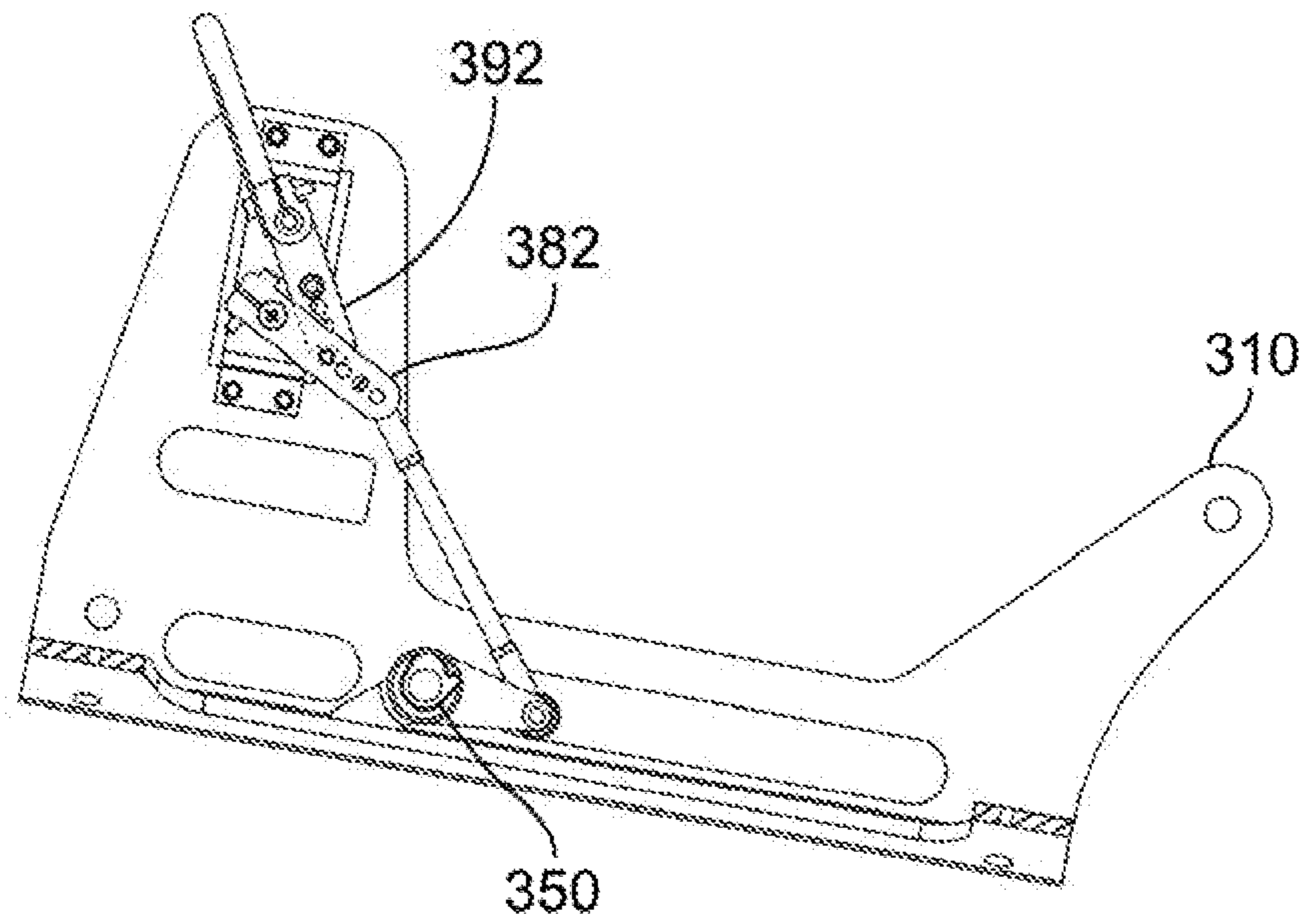


FIG. 4H

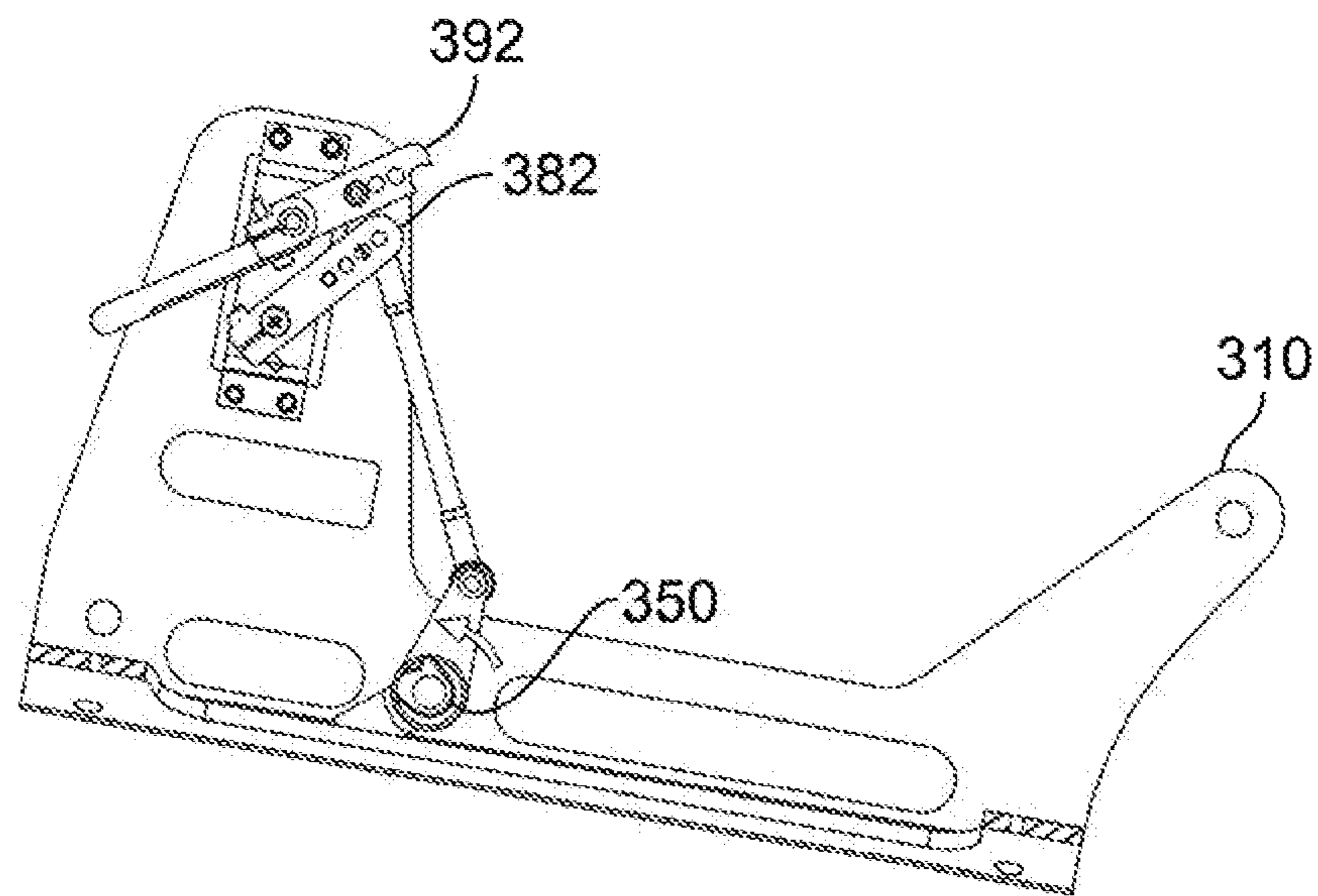


FIG. 4I

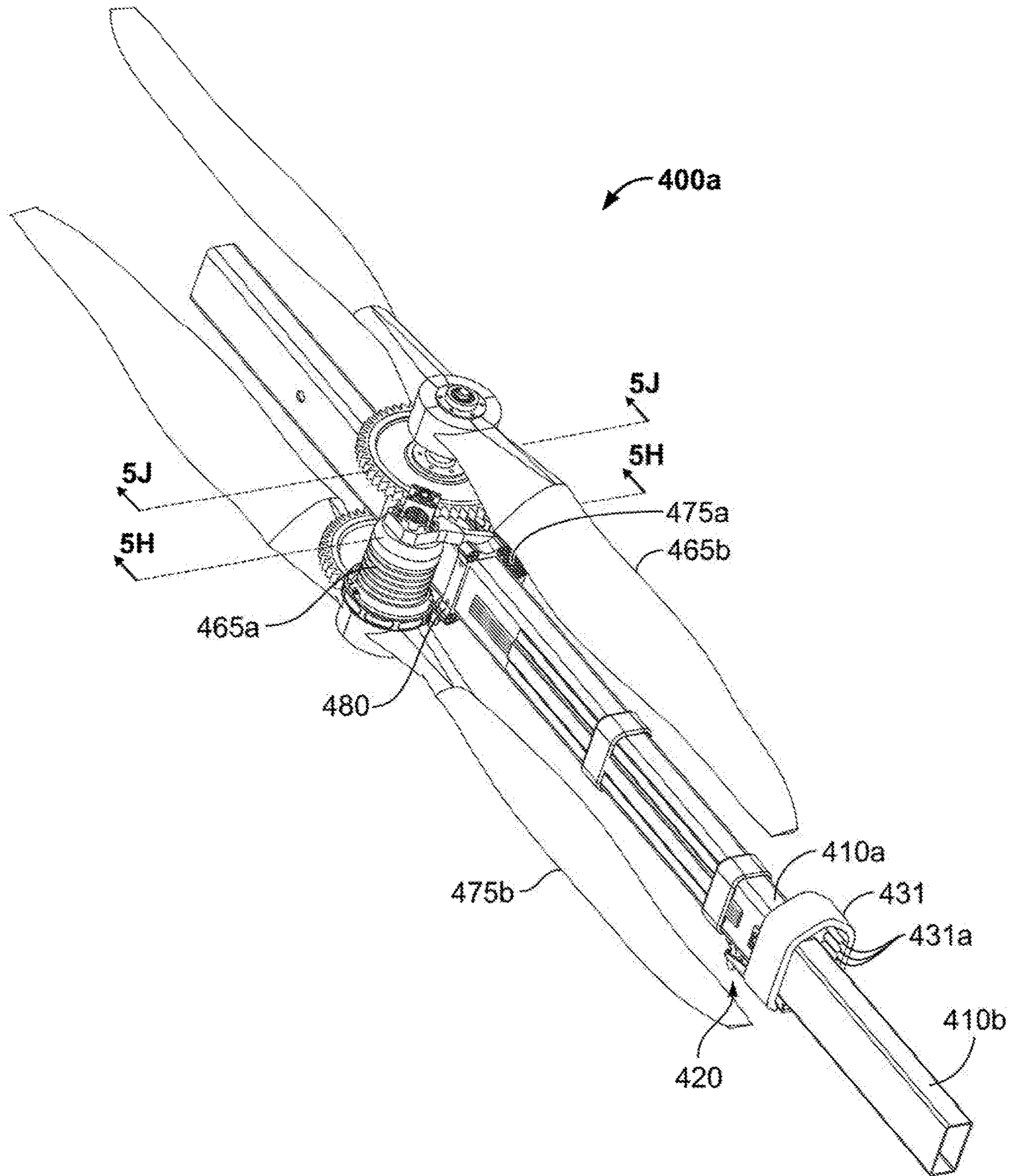


FIG. 5A

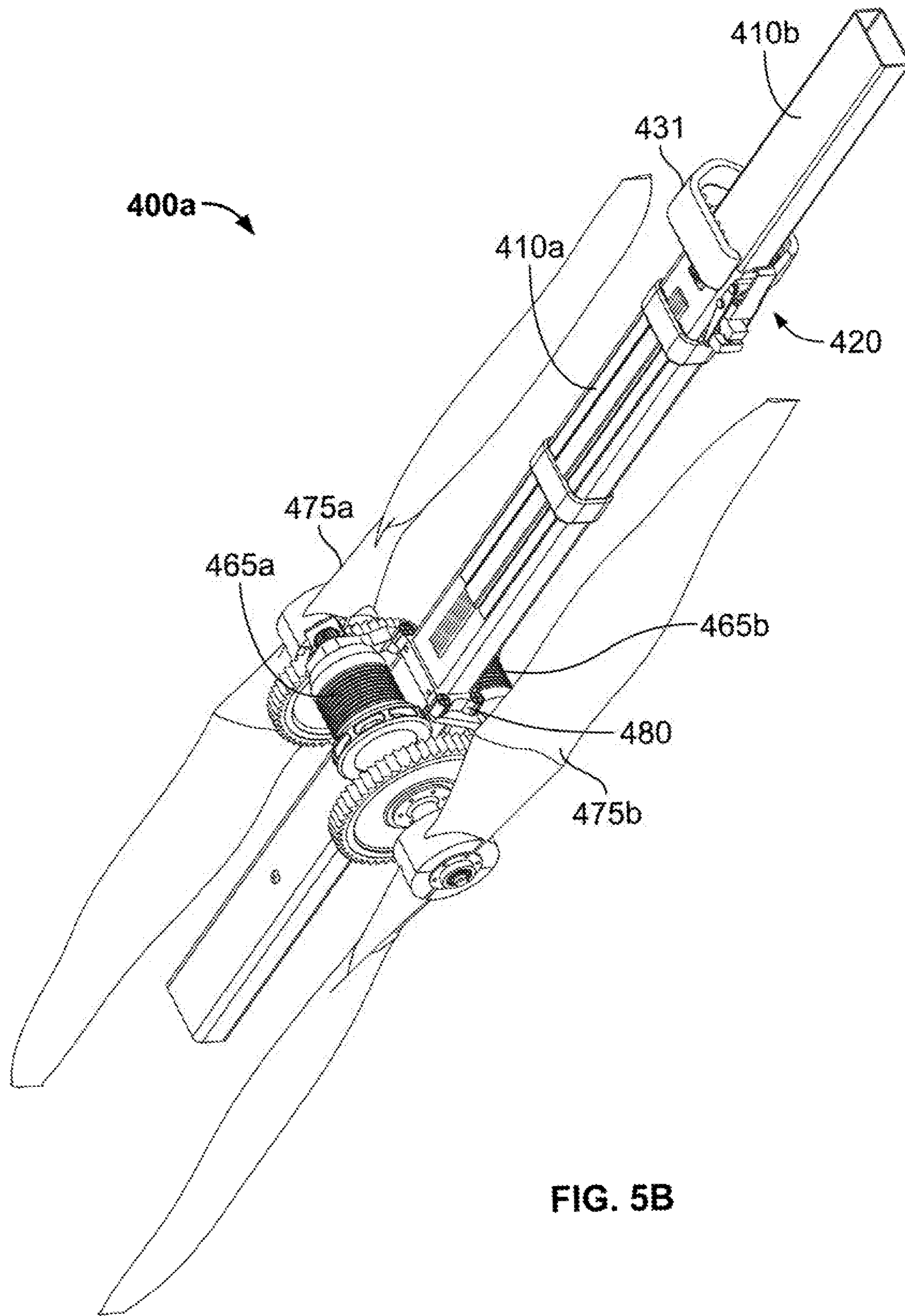


FIG. 5B

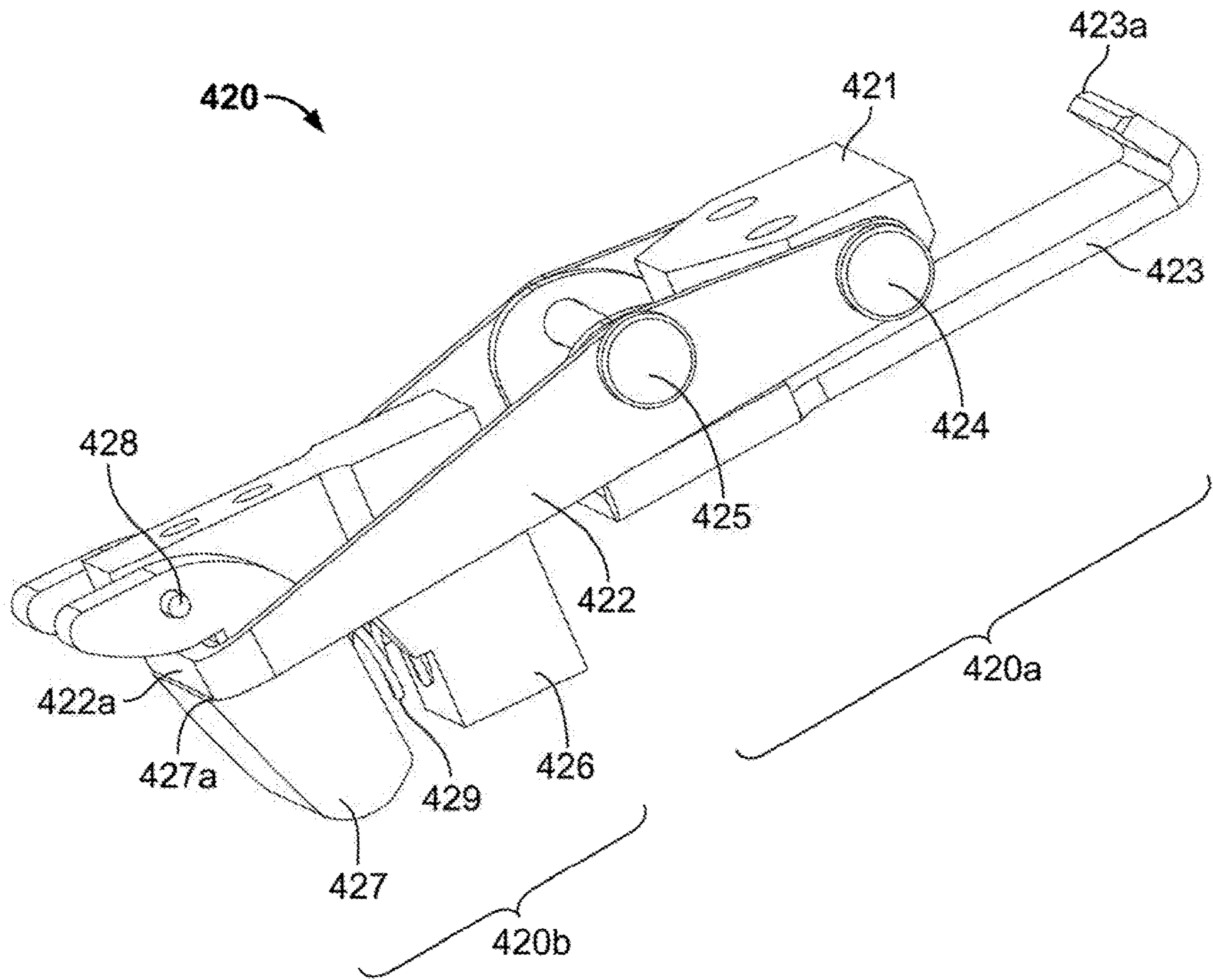


FIG. 5C

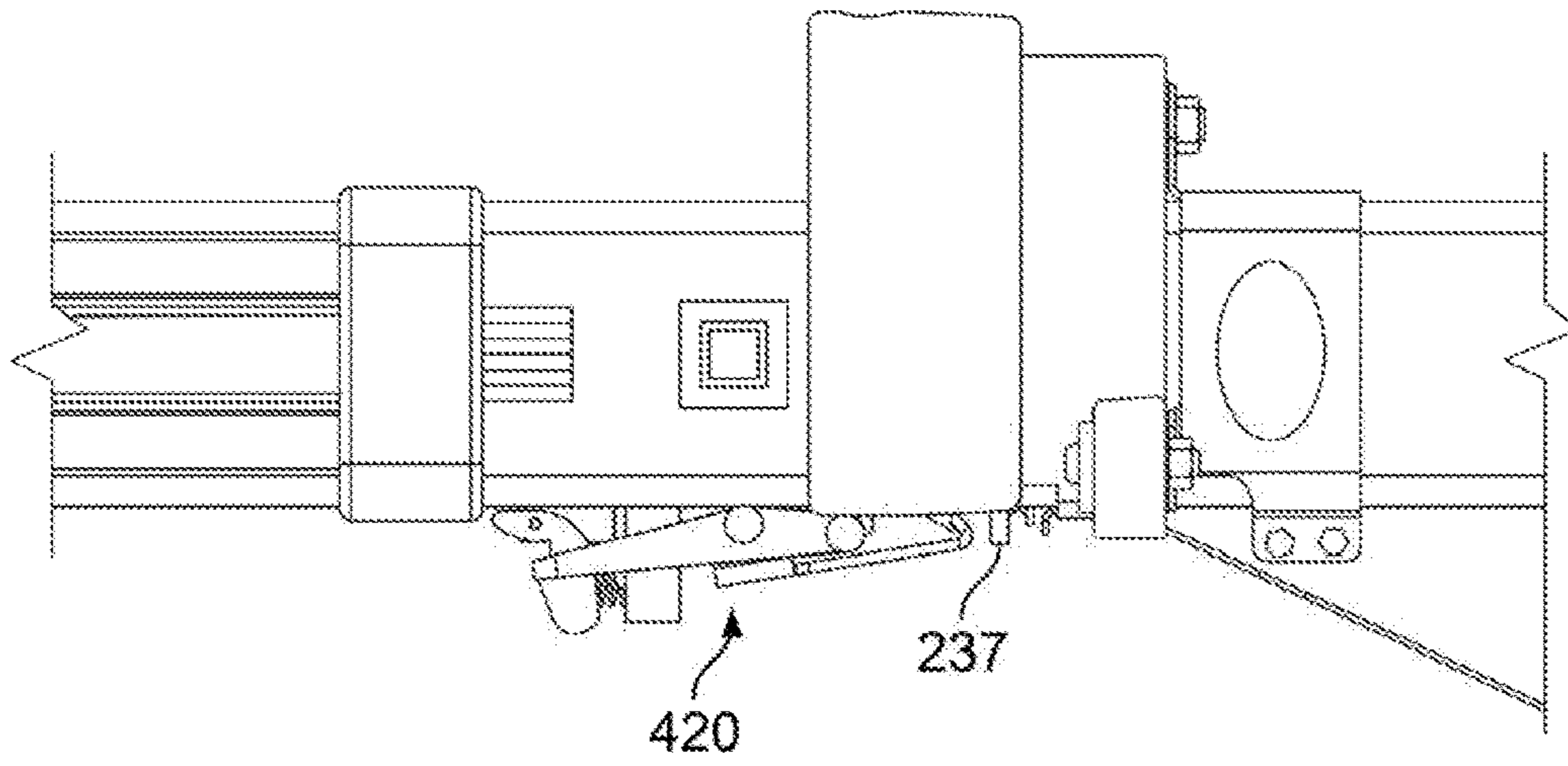


FIG. 5D

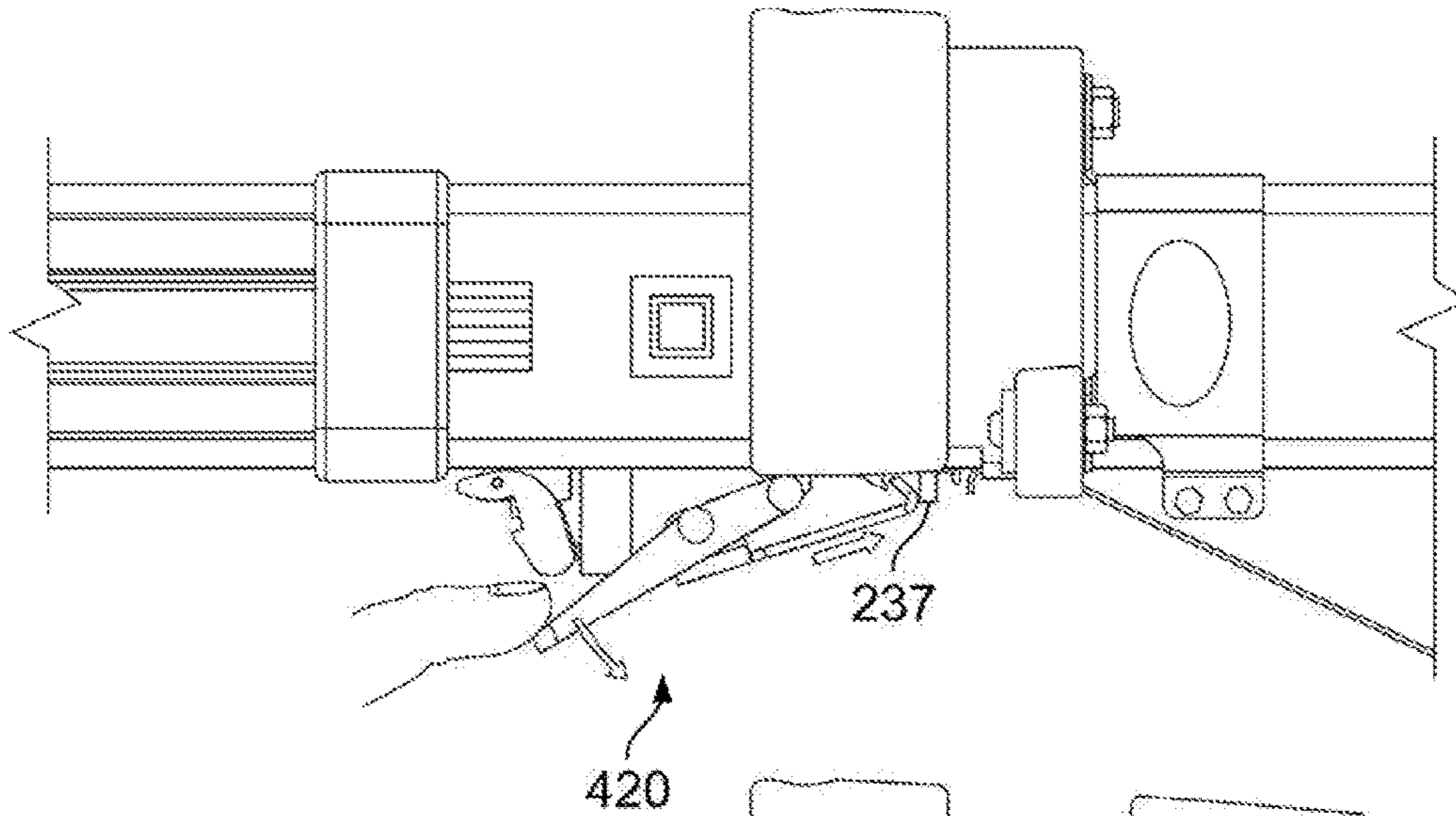


FIG. 5E

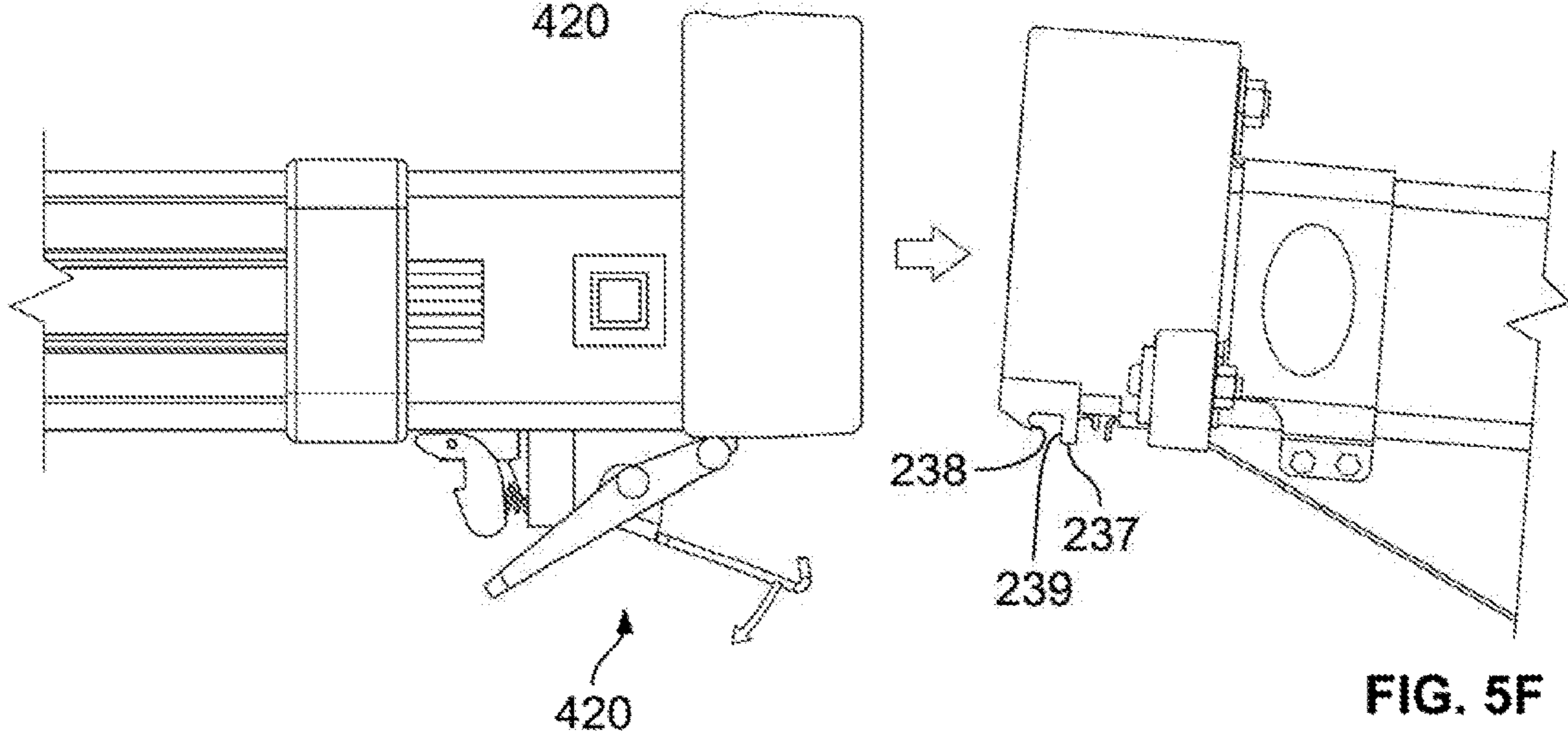


FIG. 5F

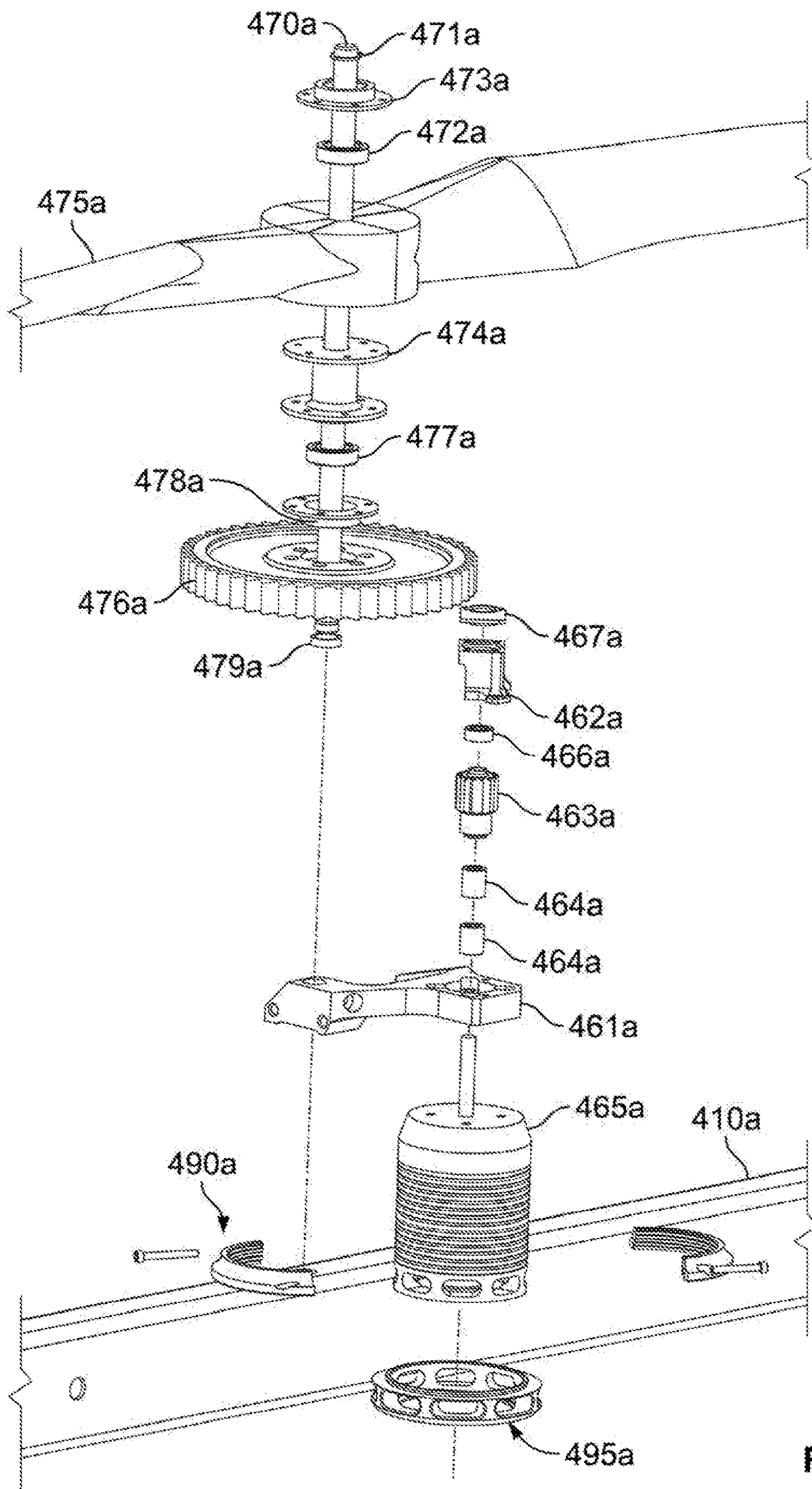


FIG. 5G

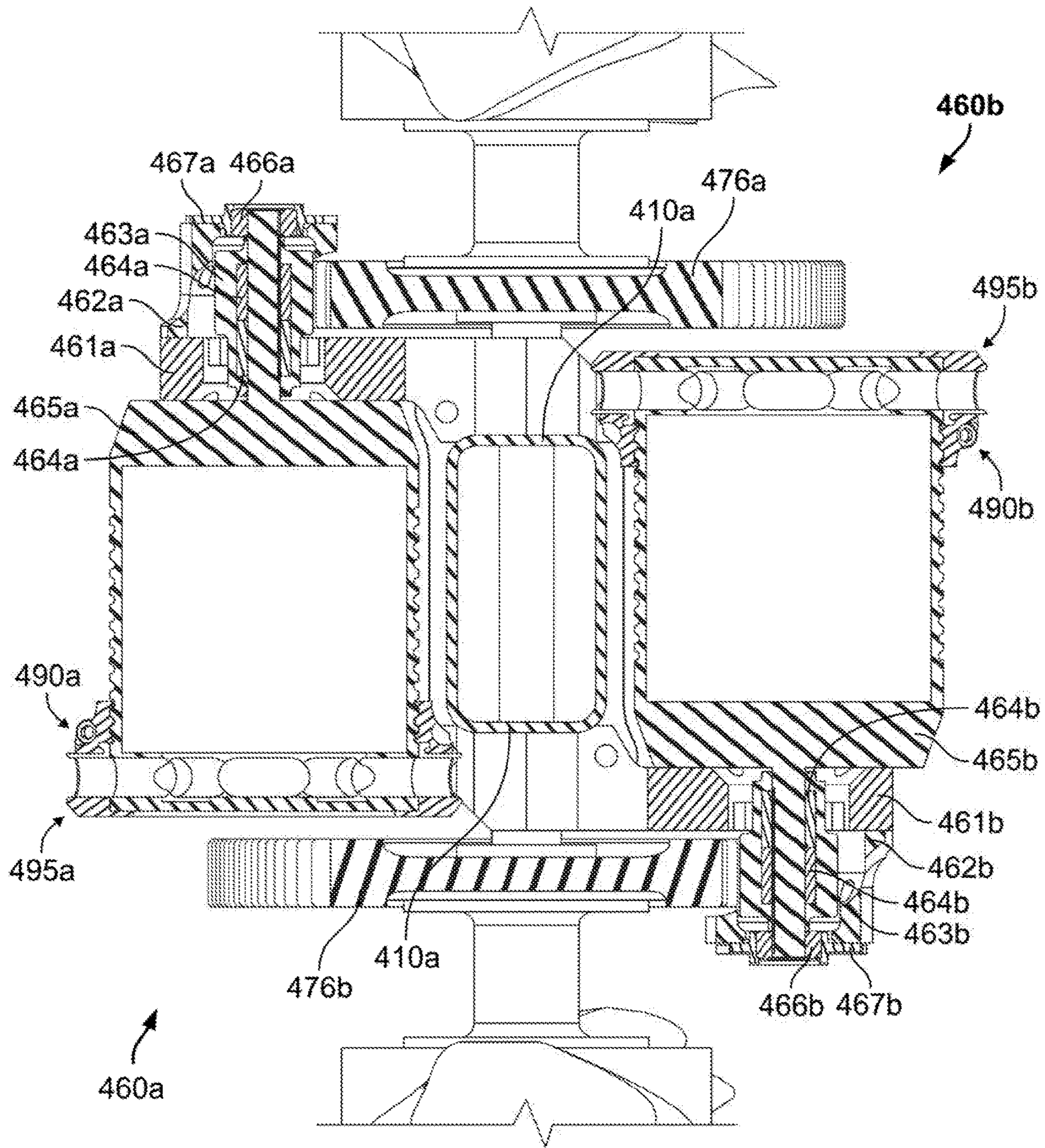


FIG. 5H

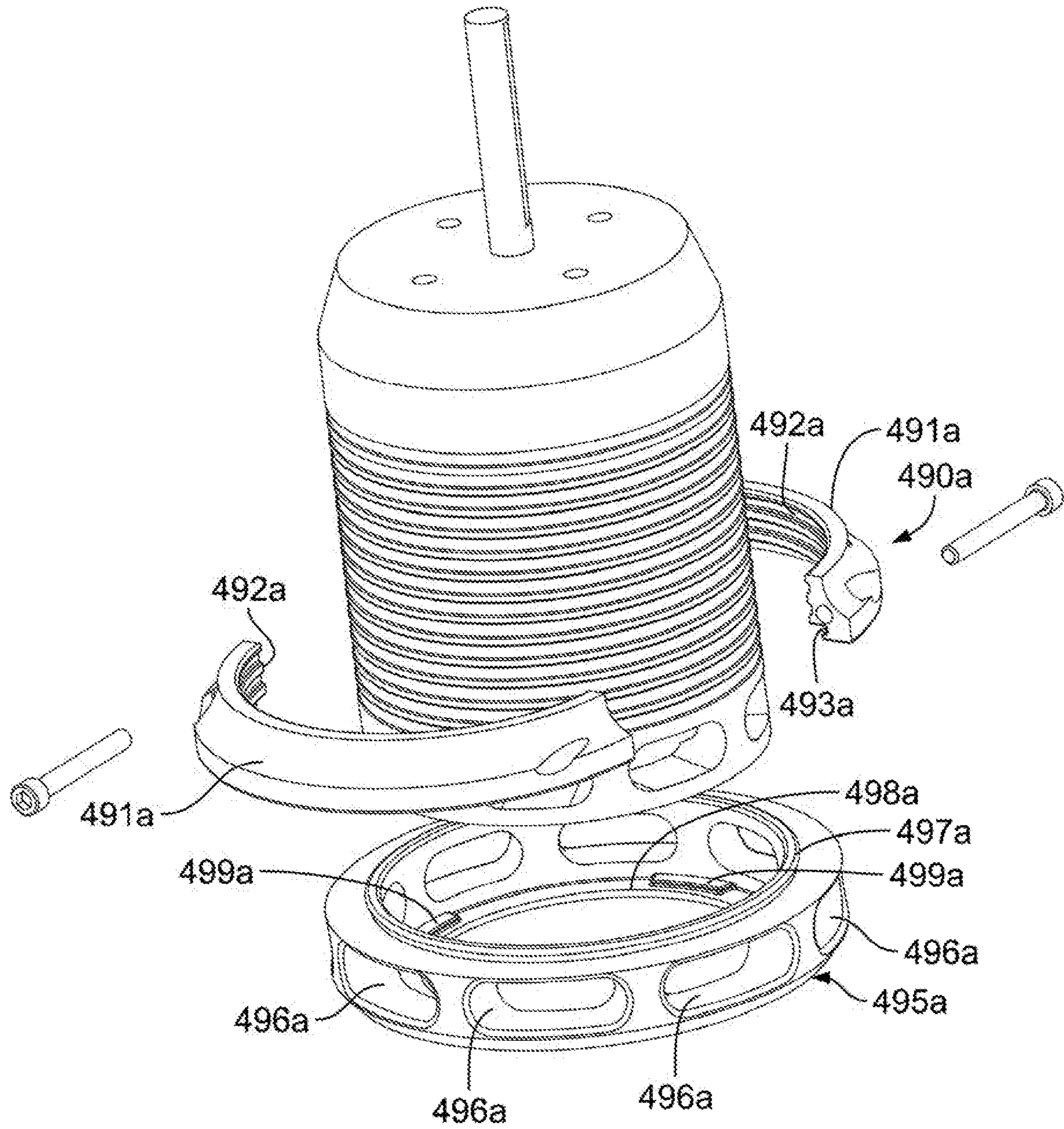


FIG. 5I

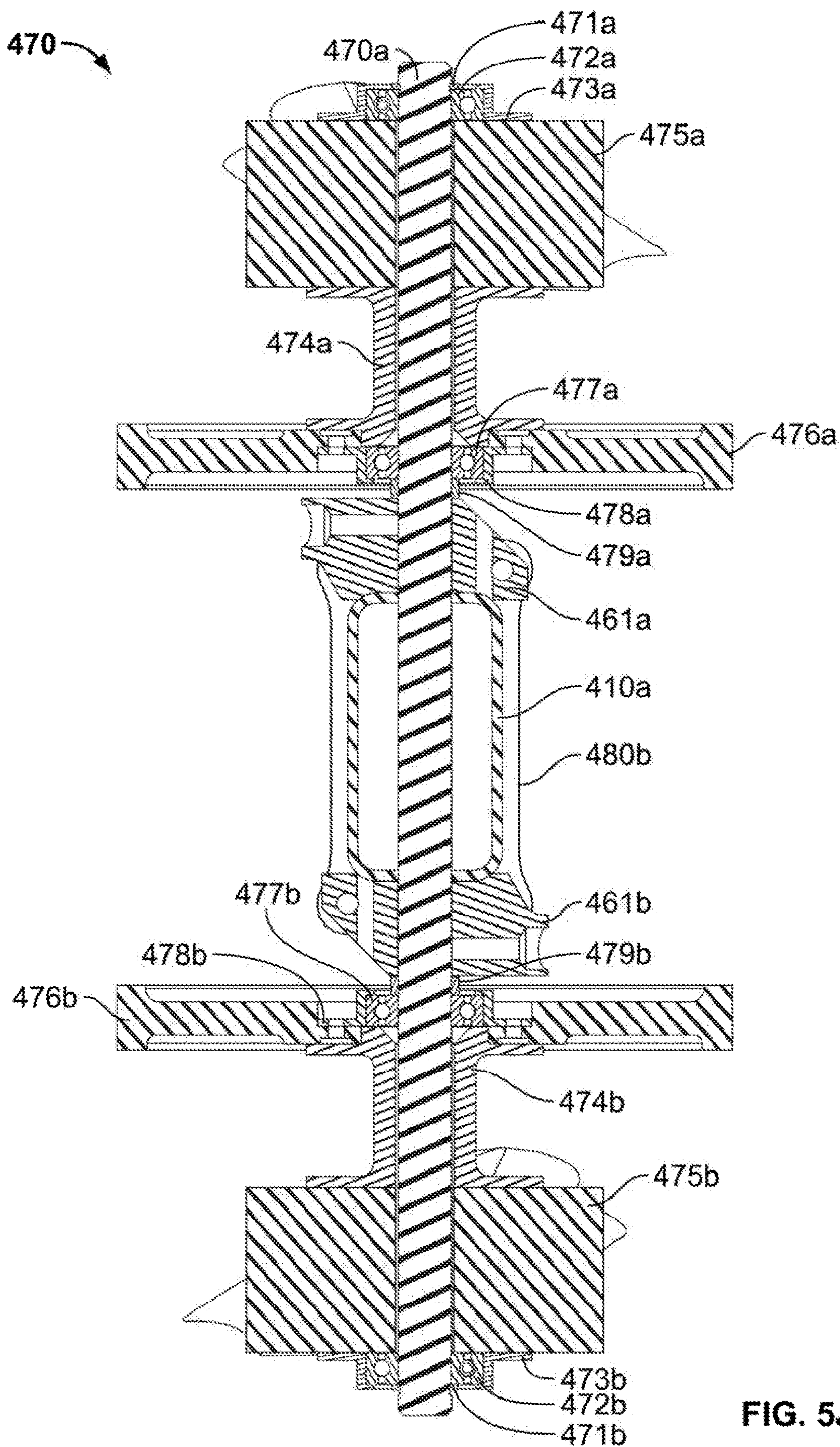
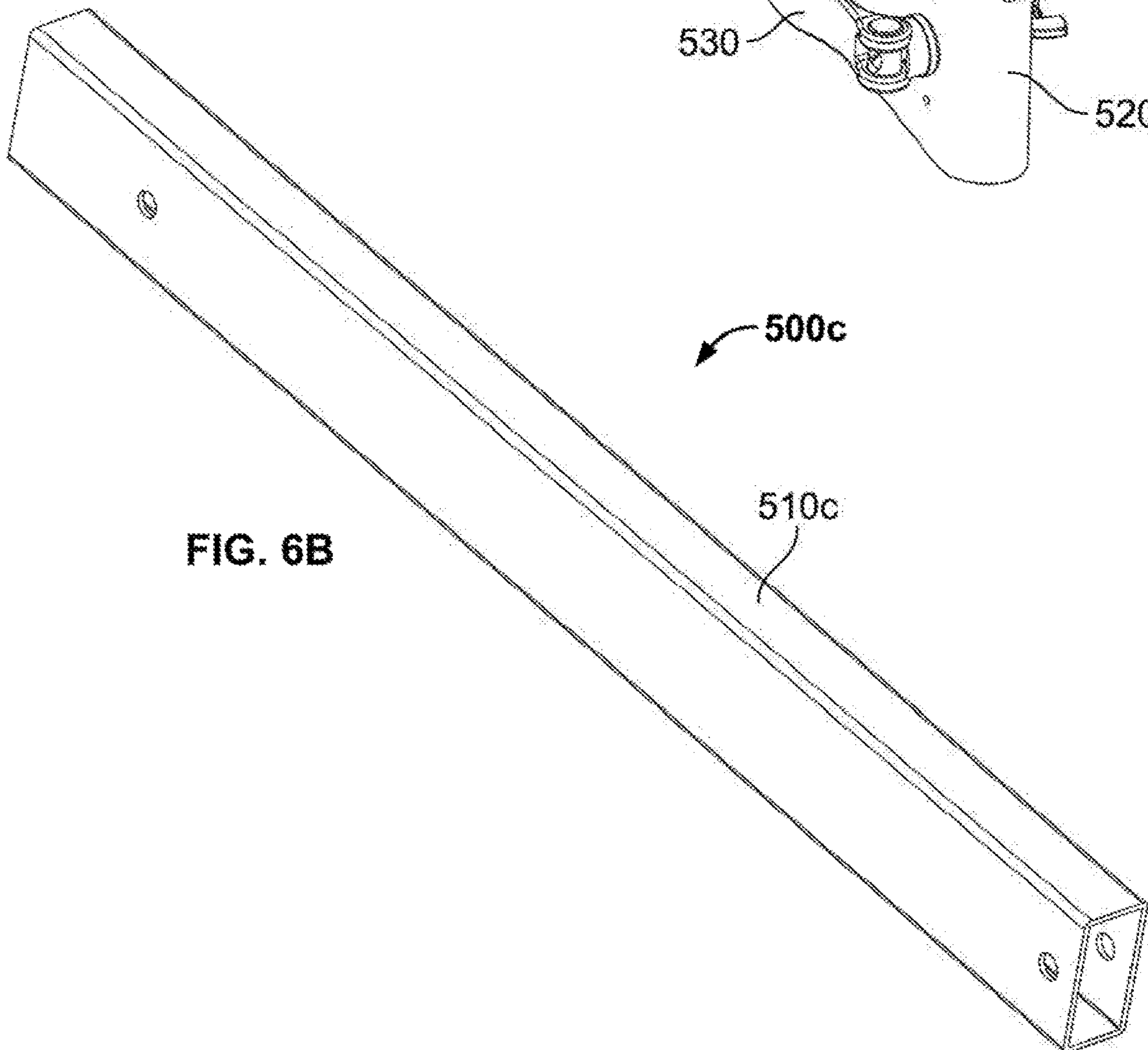
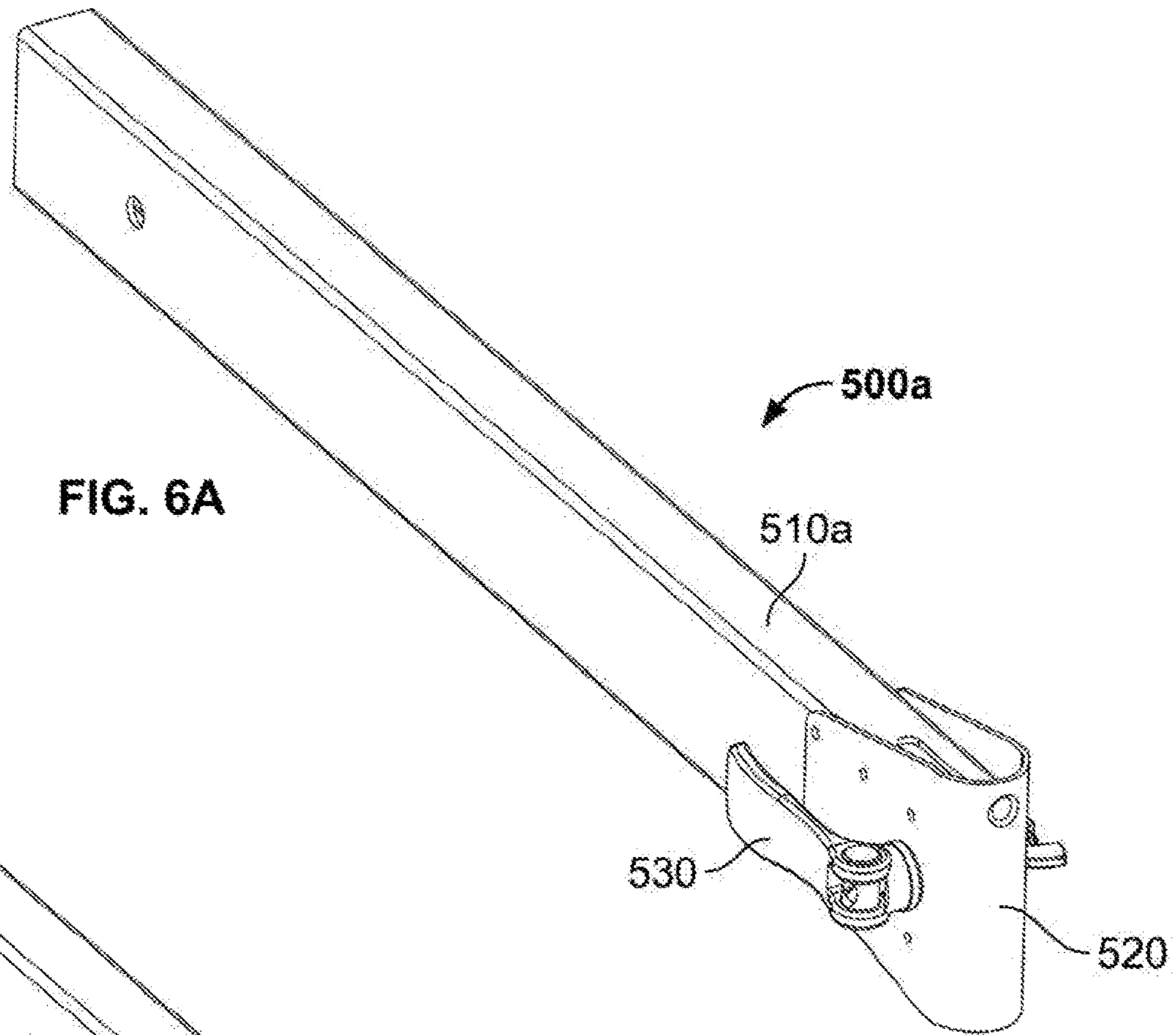
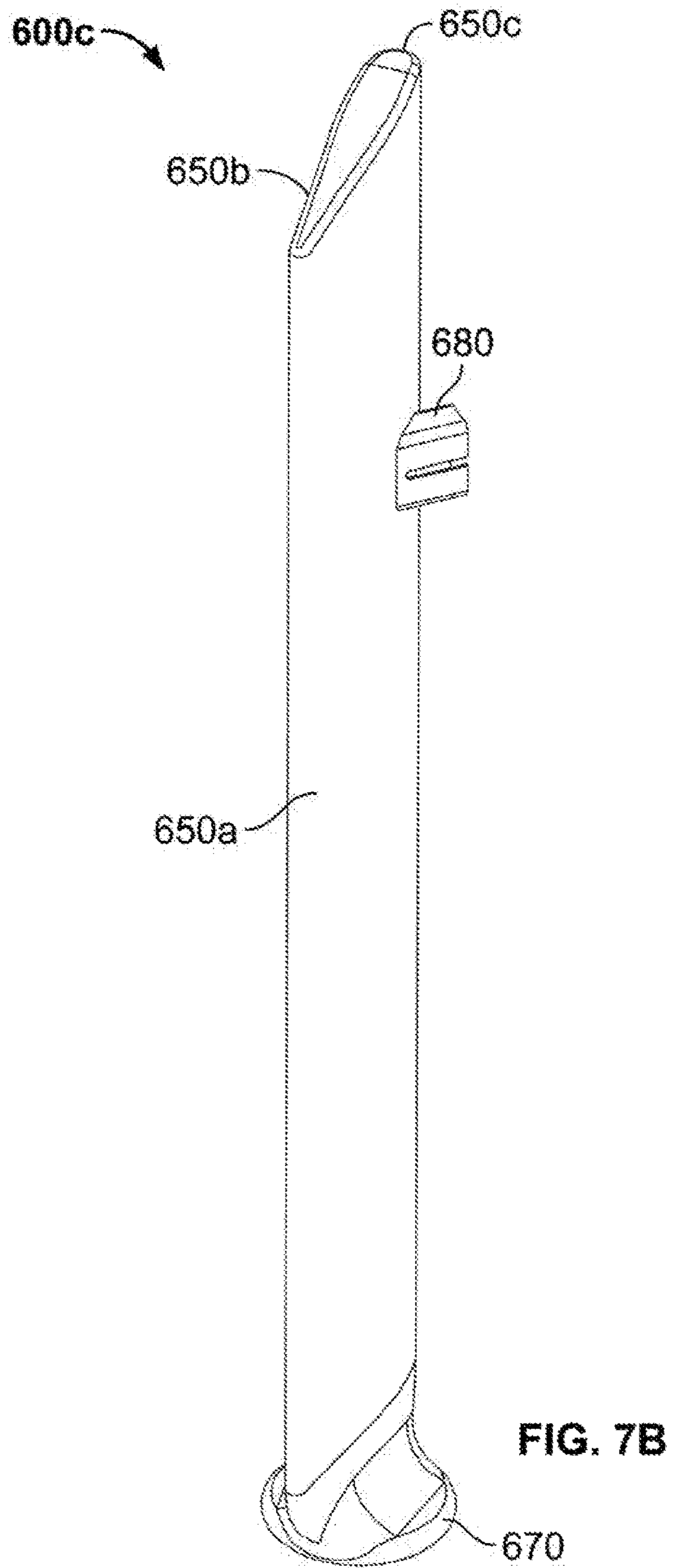
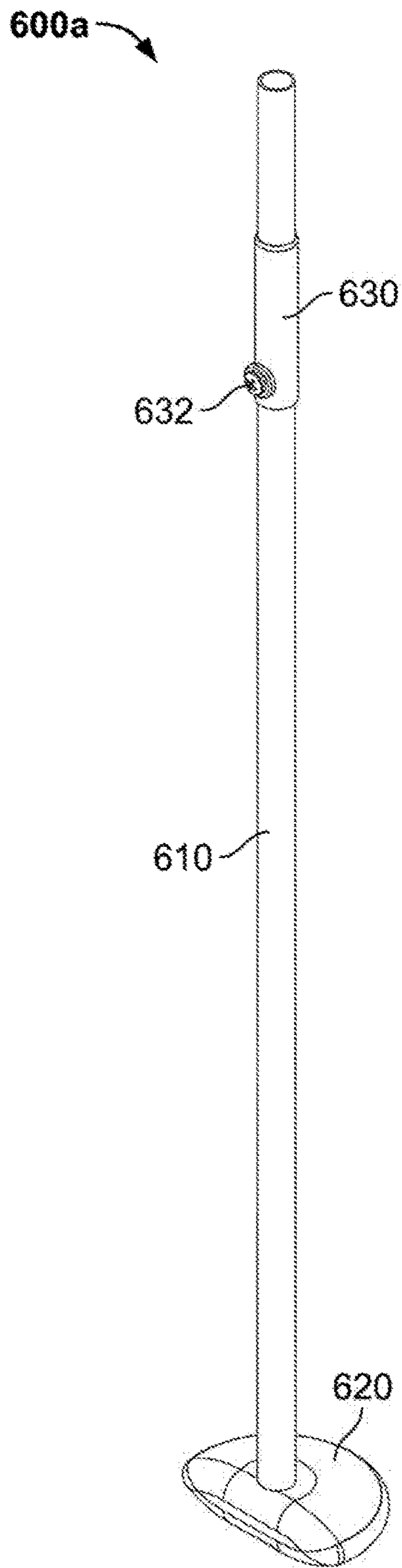


FIG. 5J





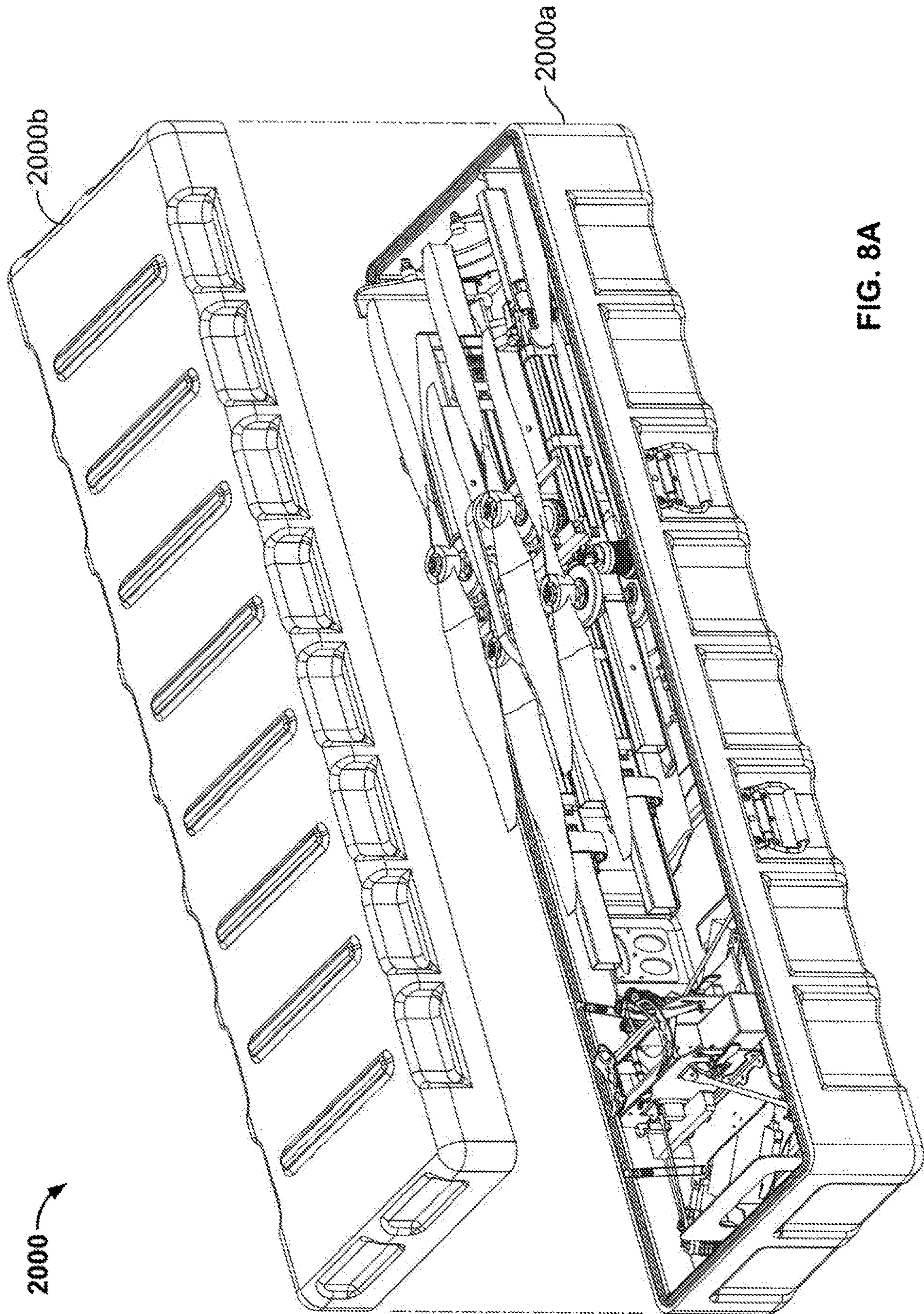


FIG. 8A

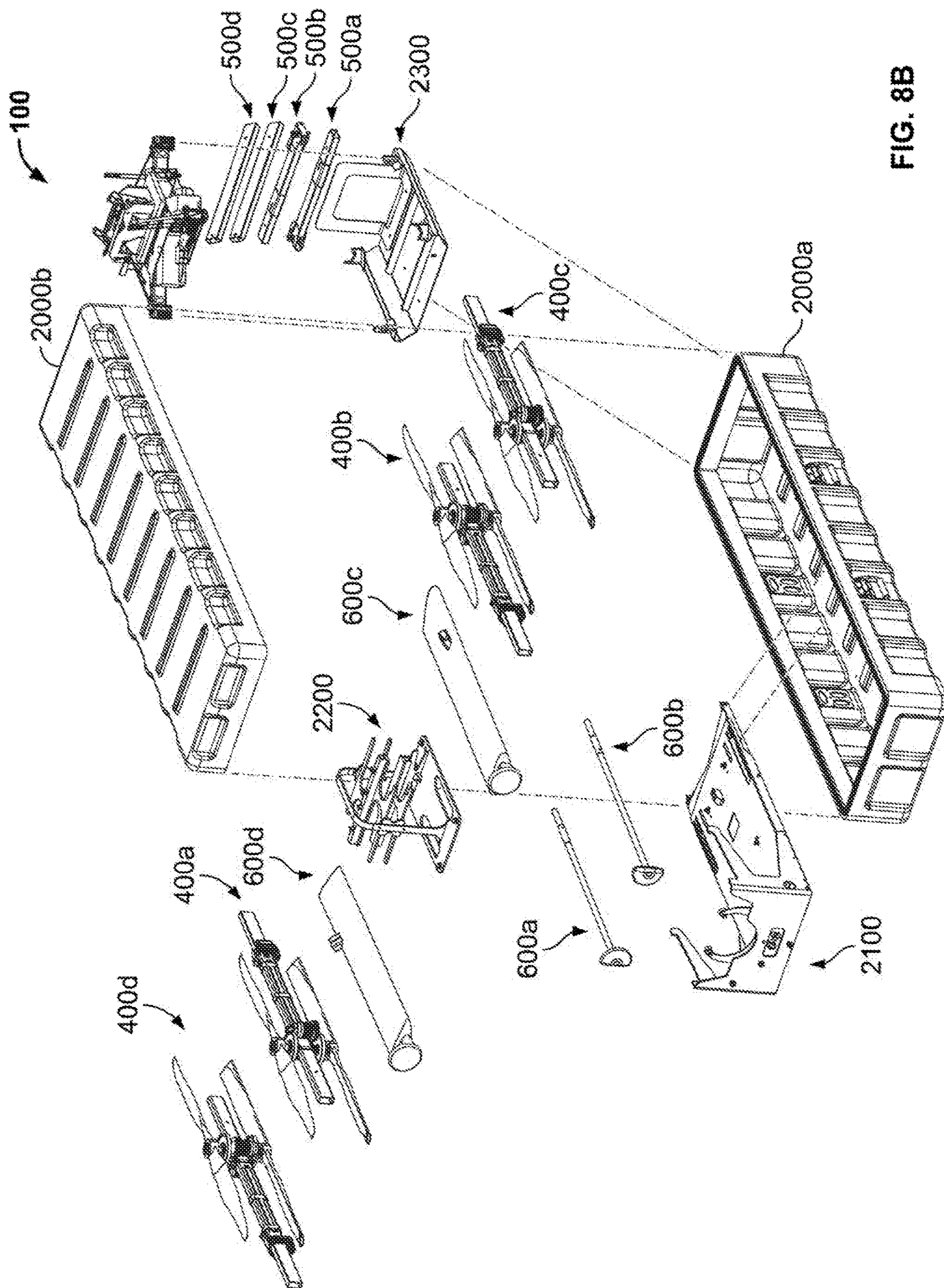


FIG. 8B

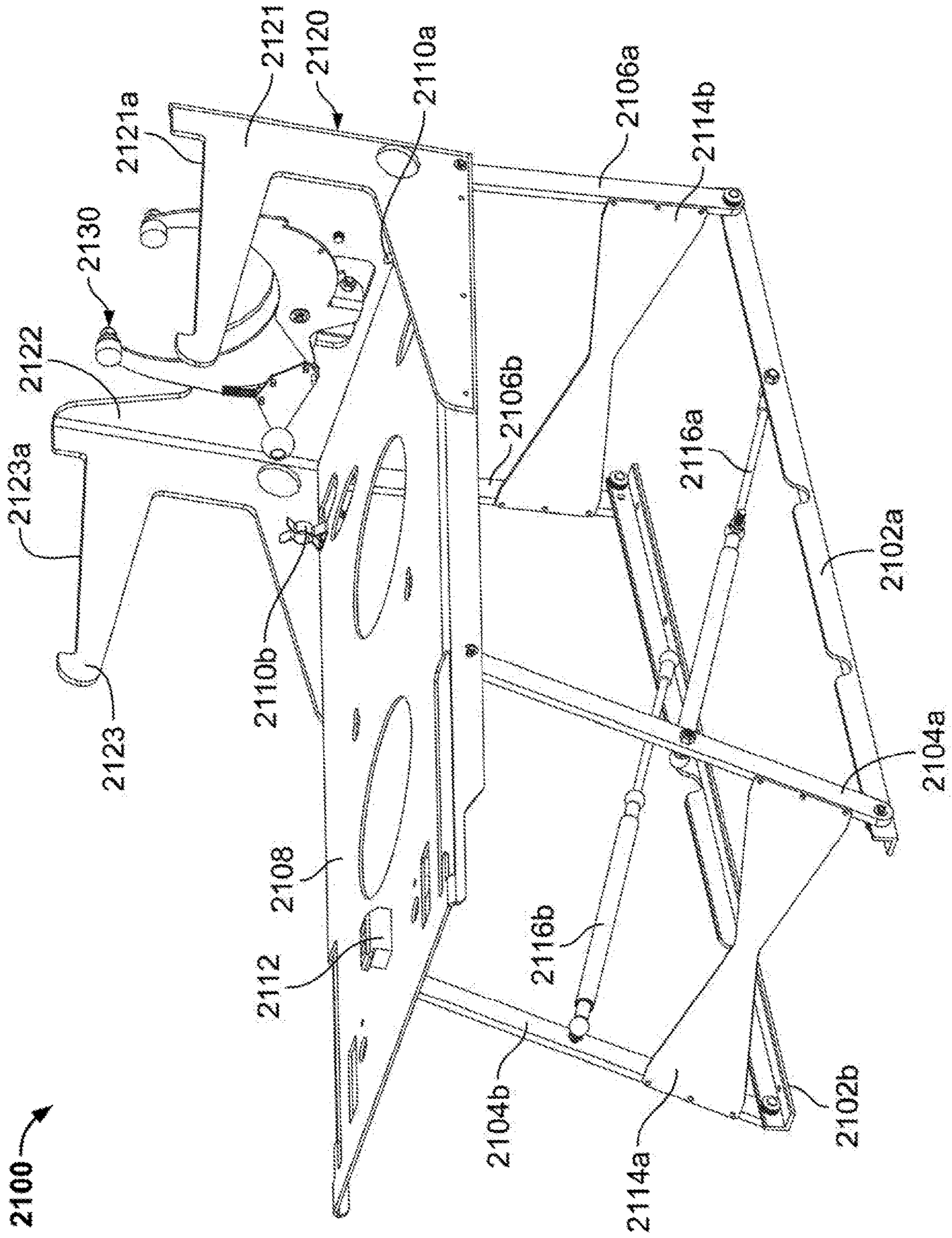


FIG. 8C

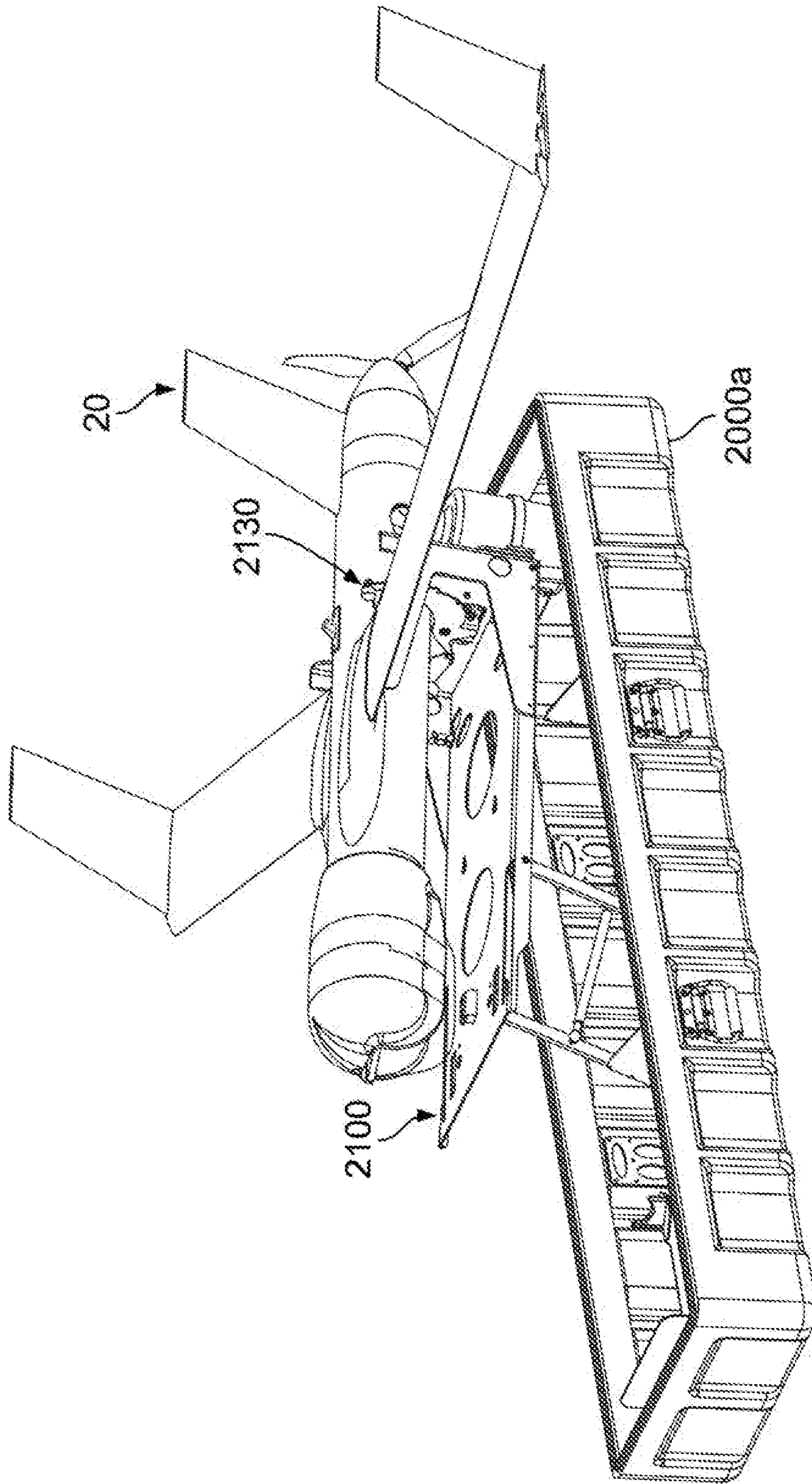


FIG. 8D

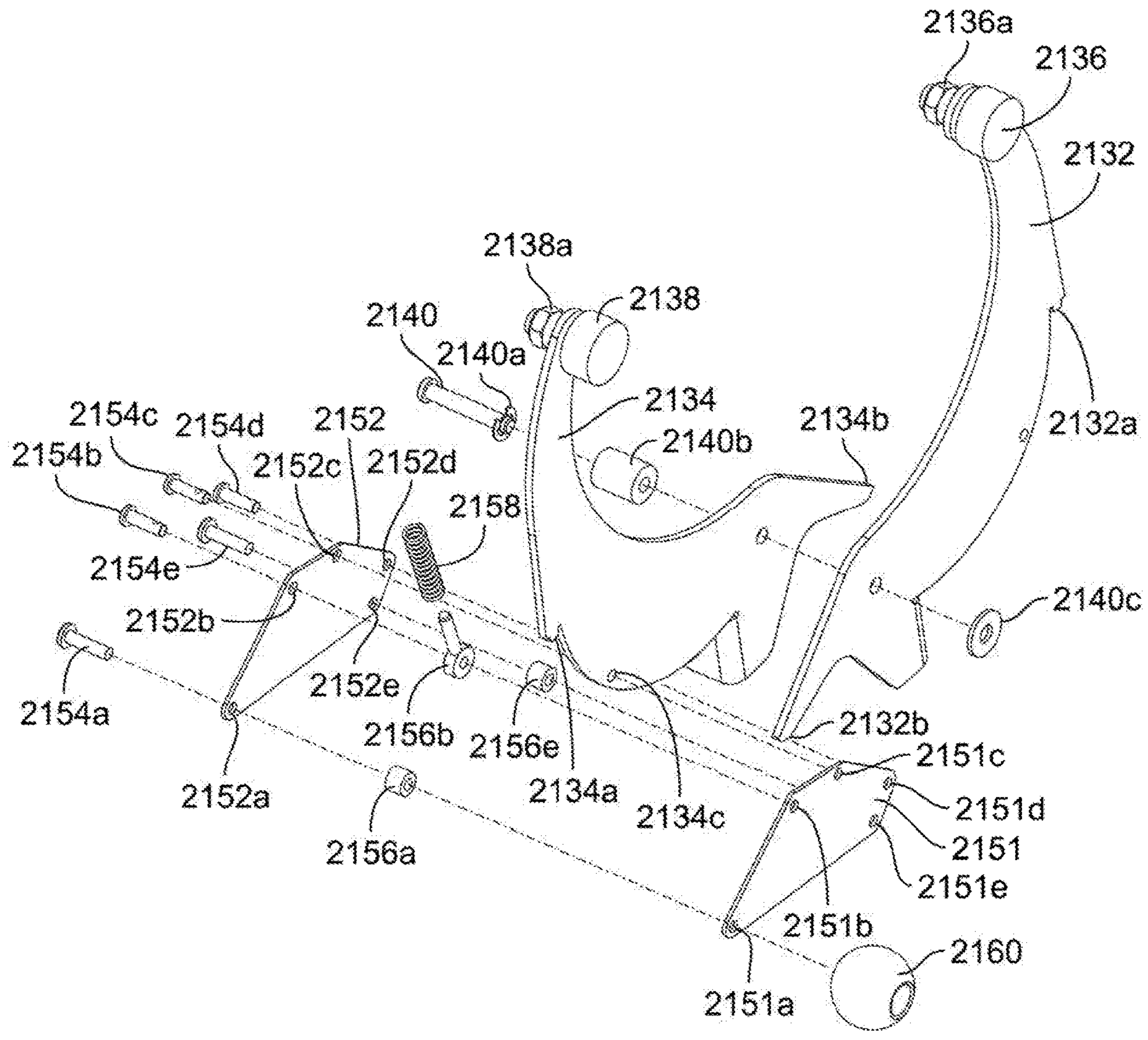


FIG. 8E

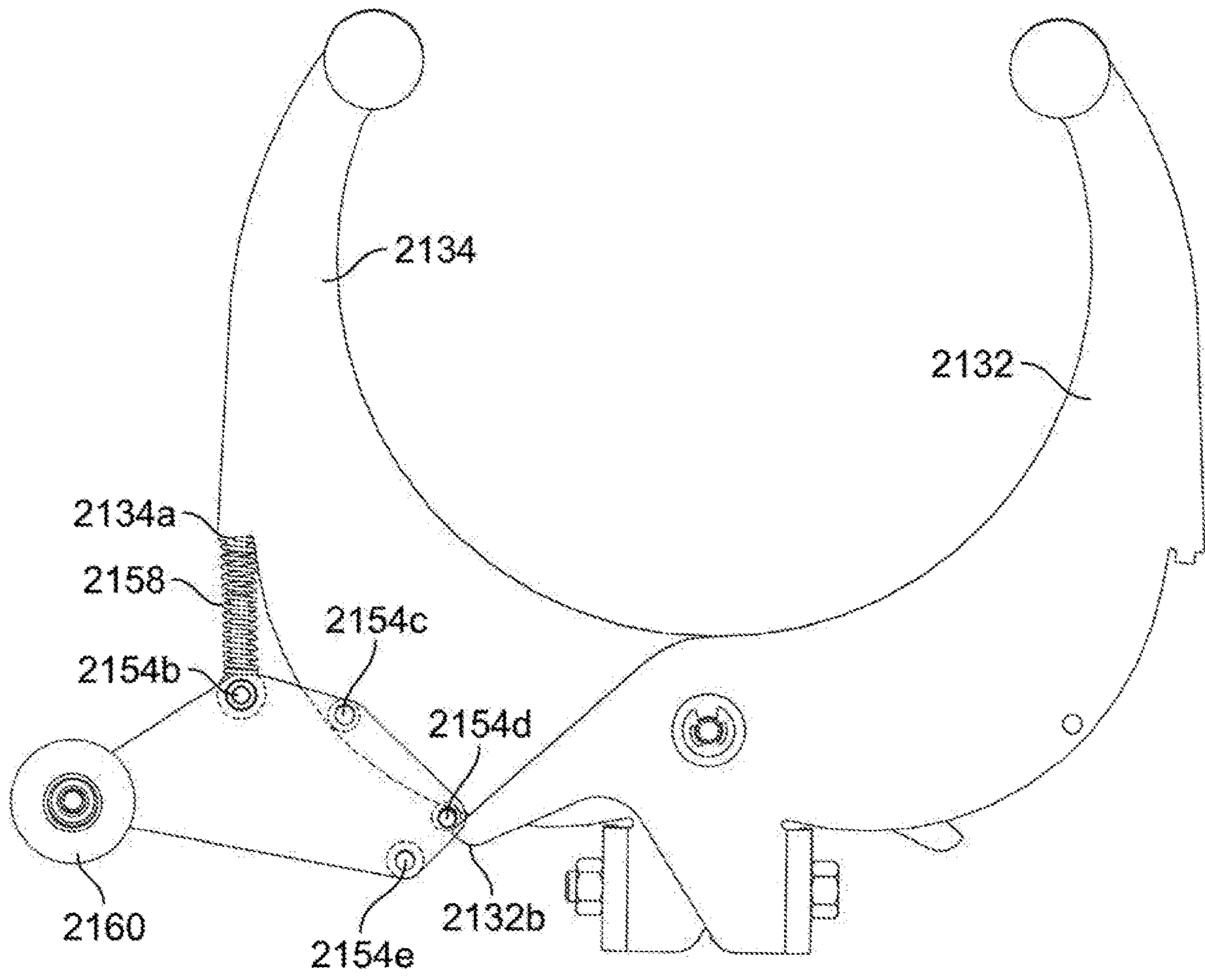


FIG. 8F

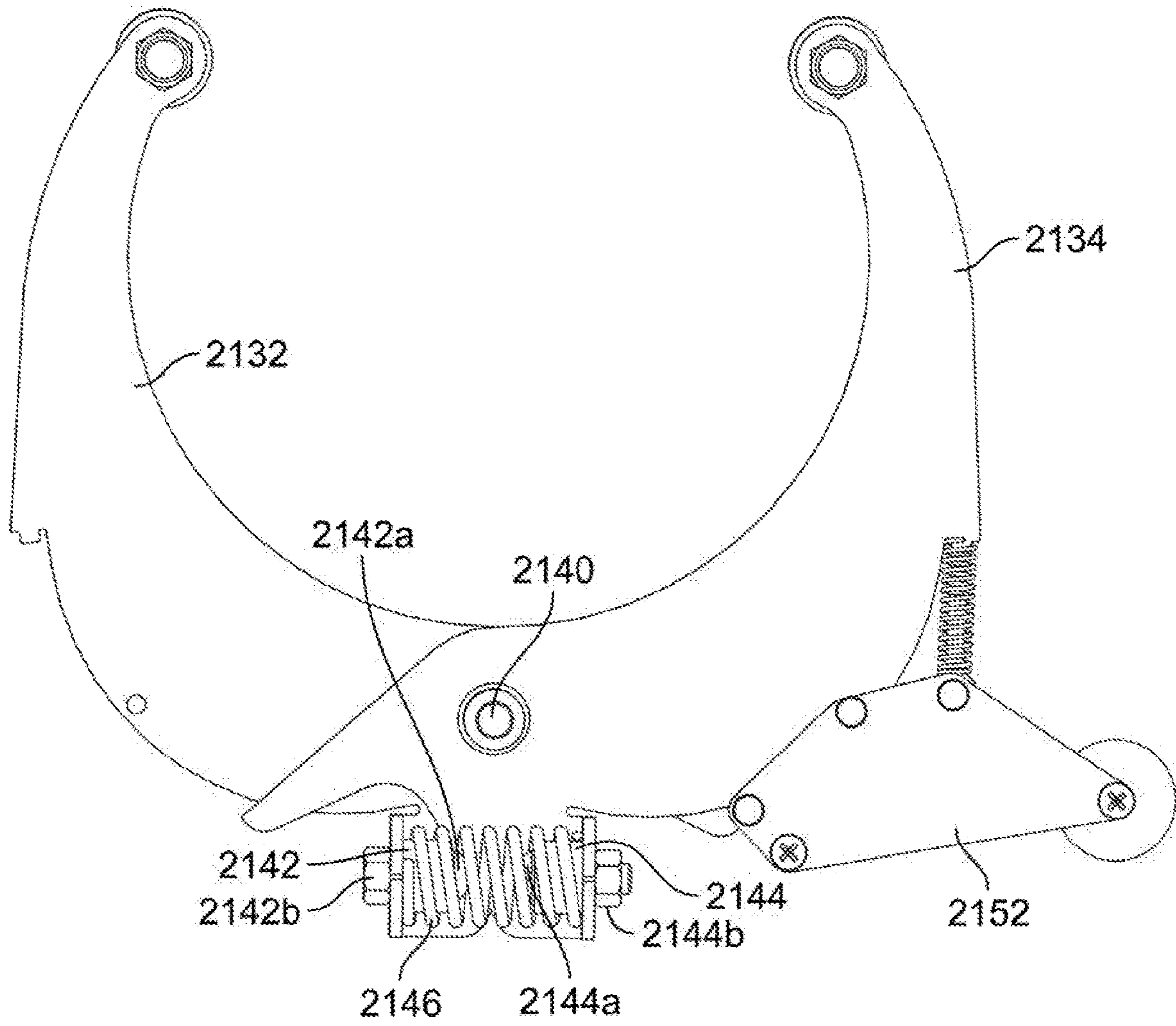


FIG. 8G

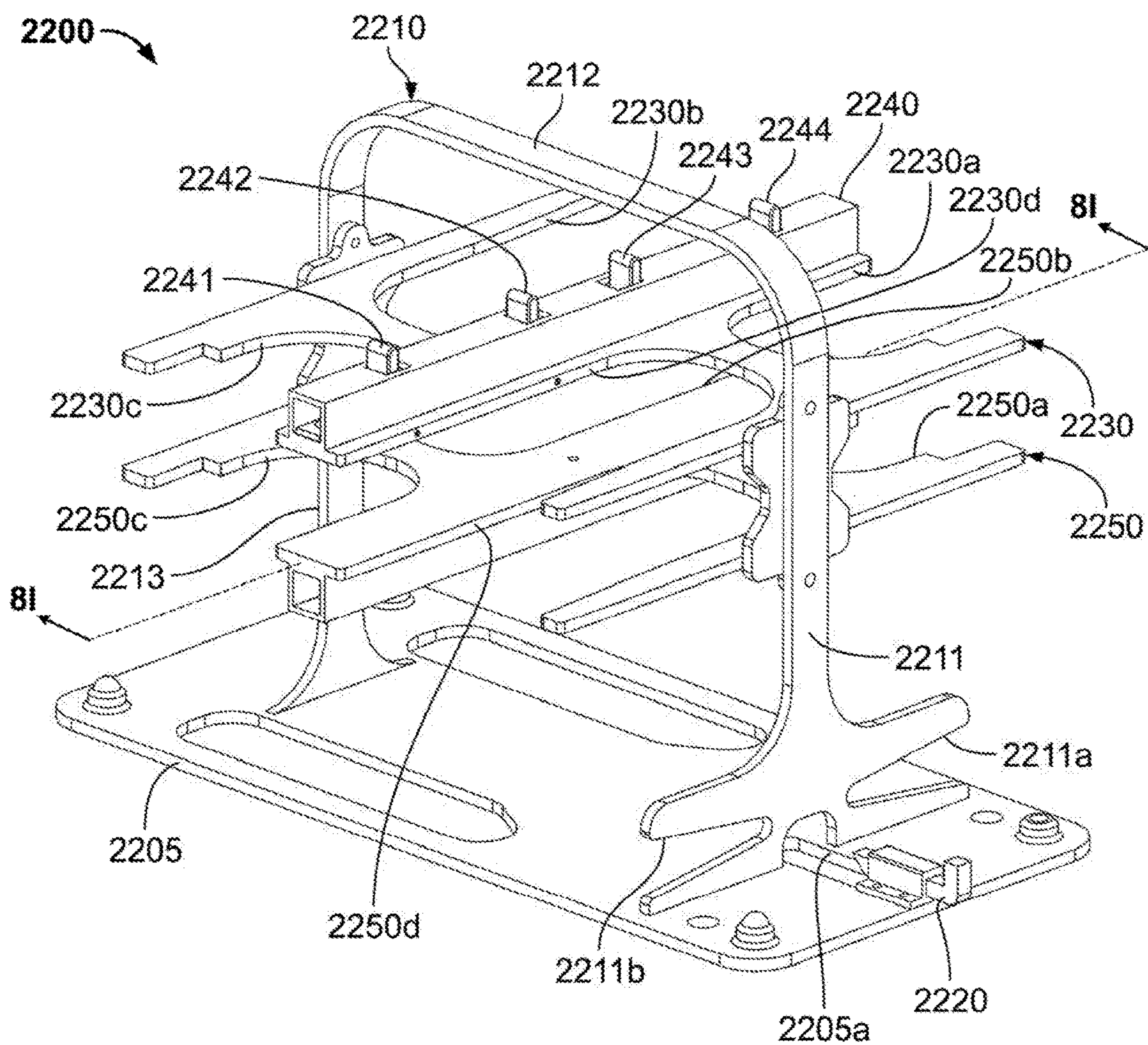


FIG. 8H

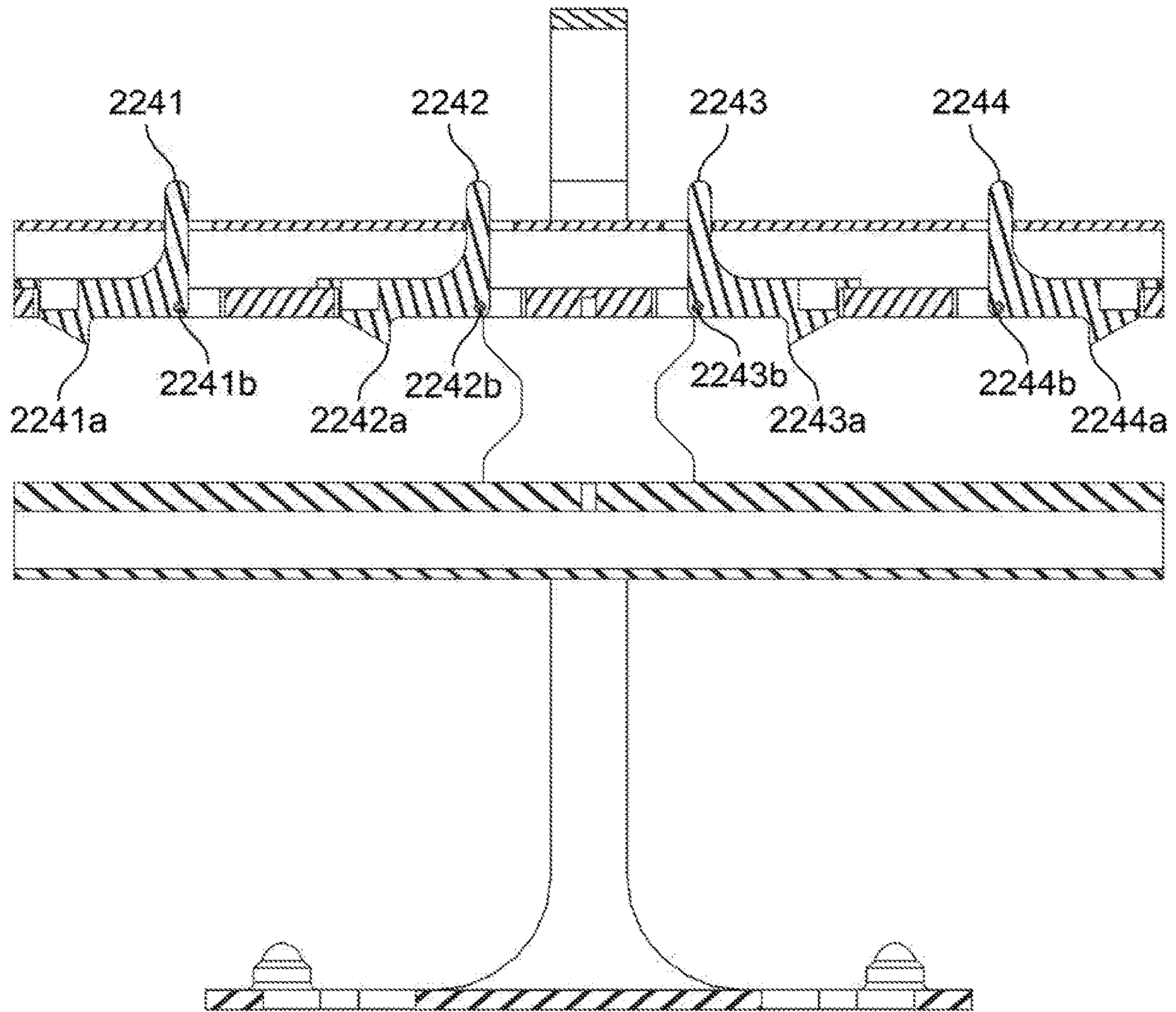


FIG. 81

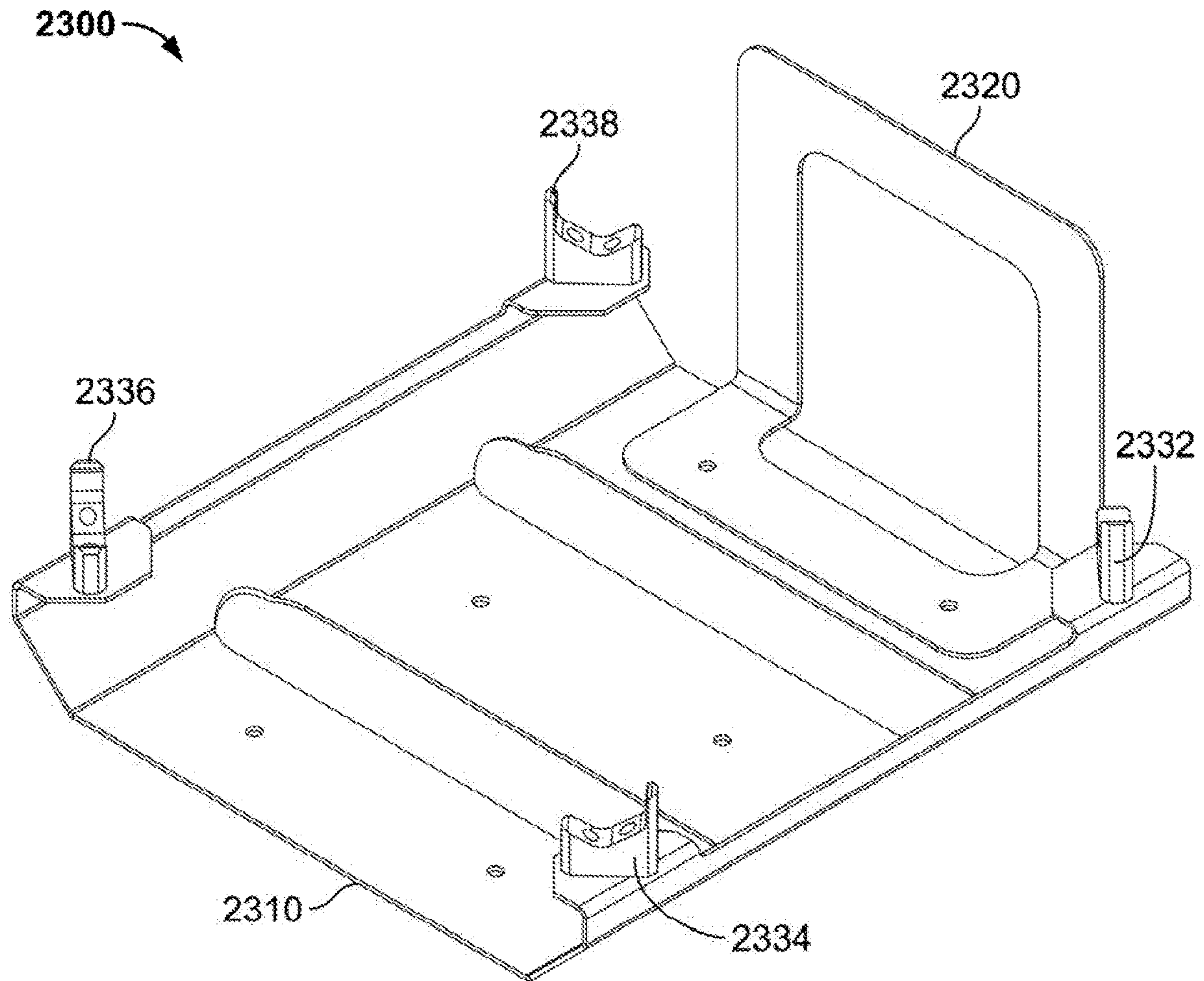


FIG. 8J

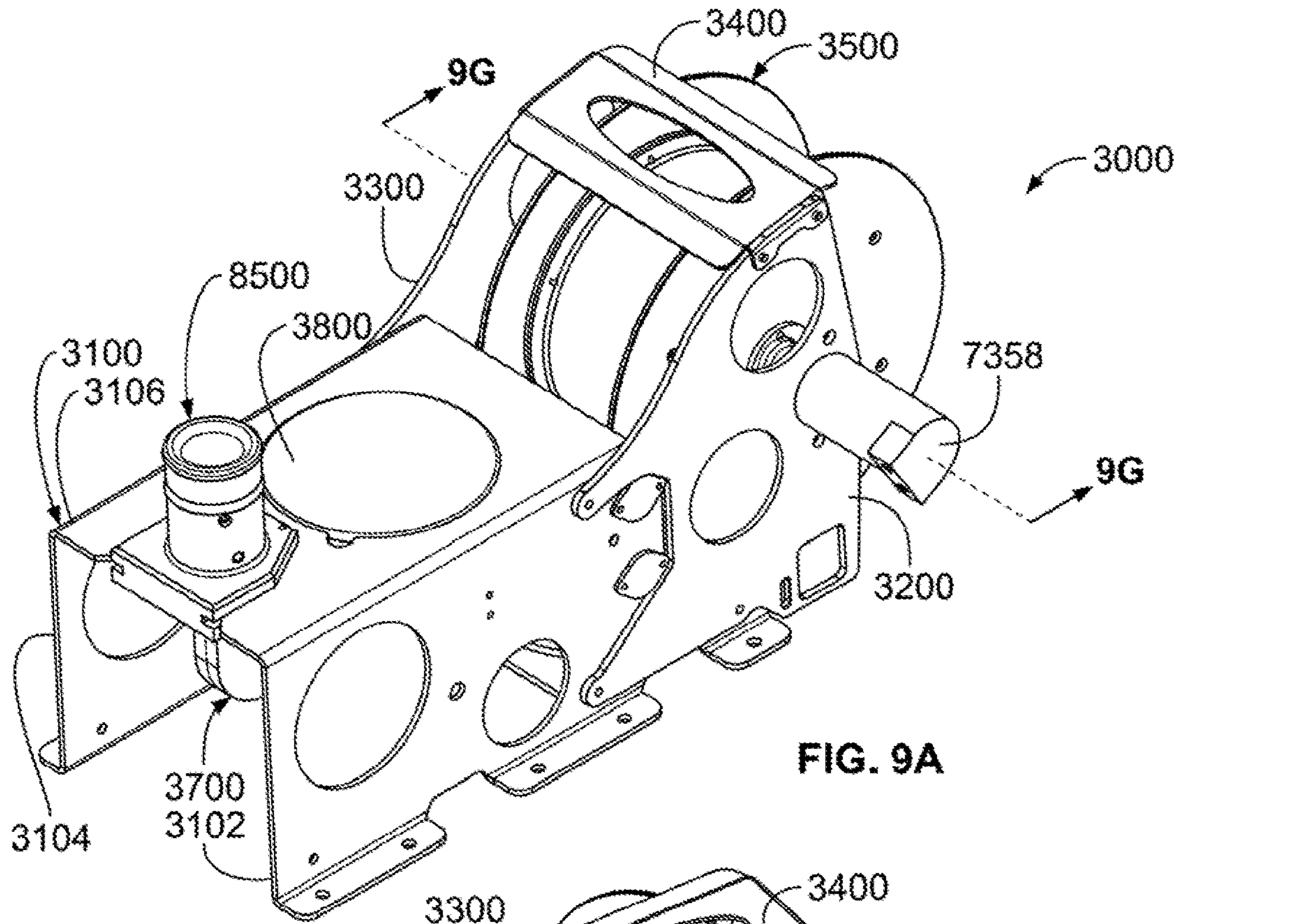


FIG. 9A

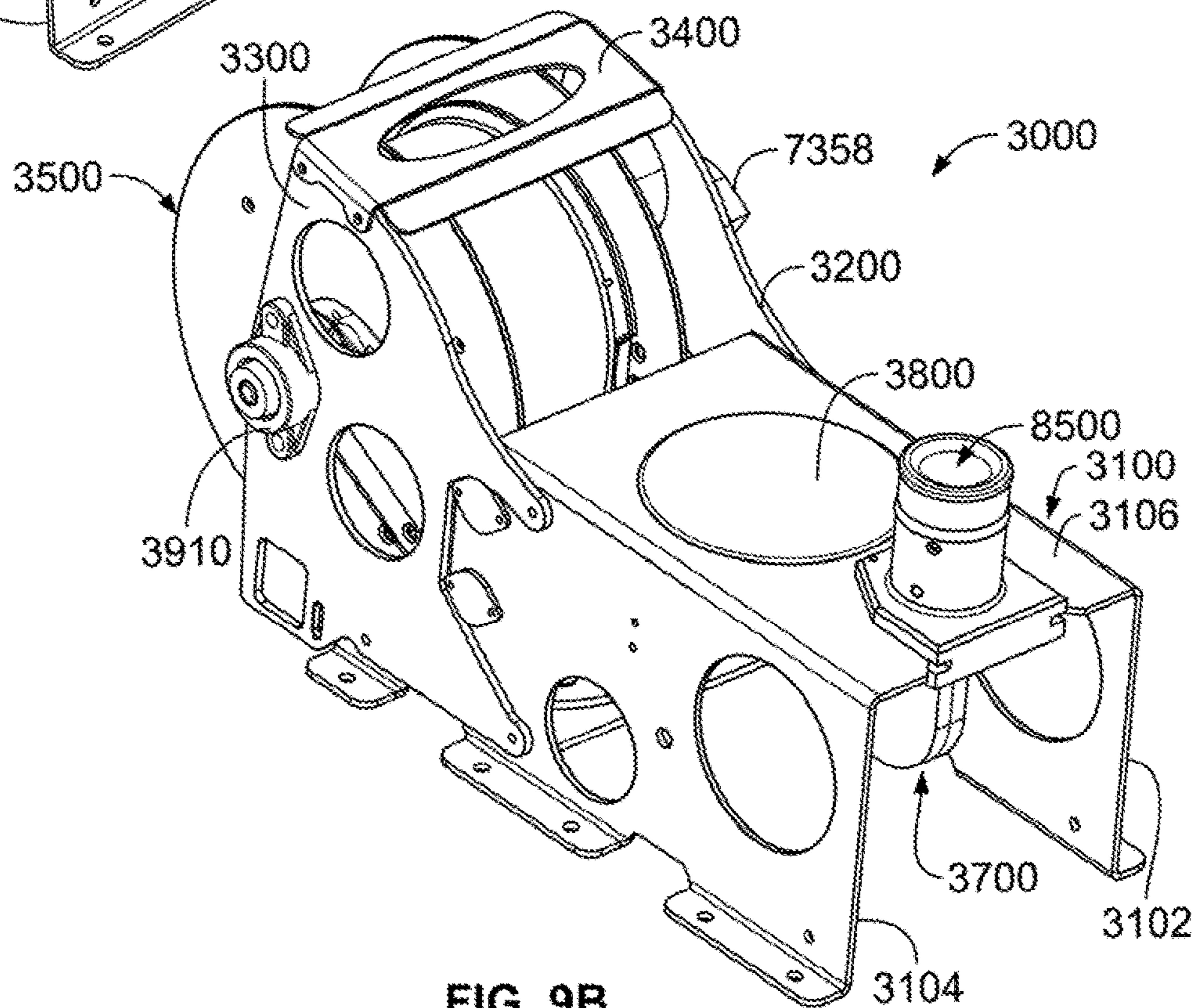


FIG. 9B

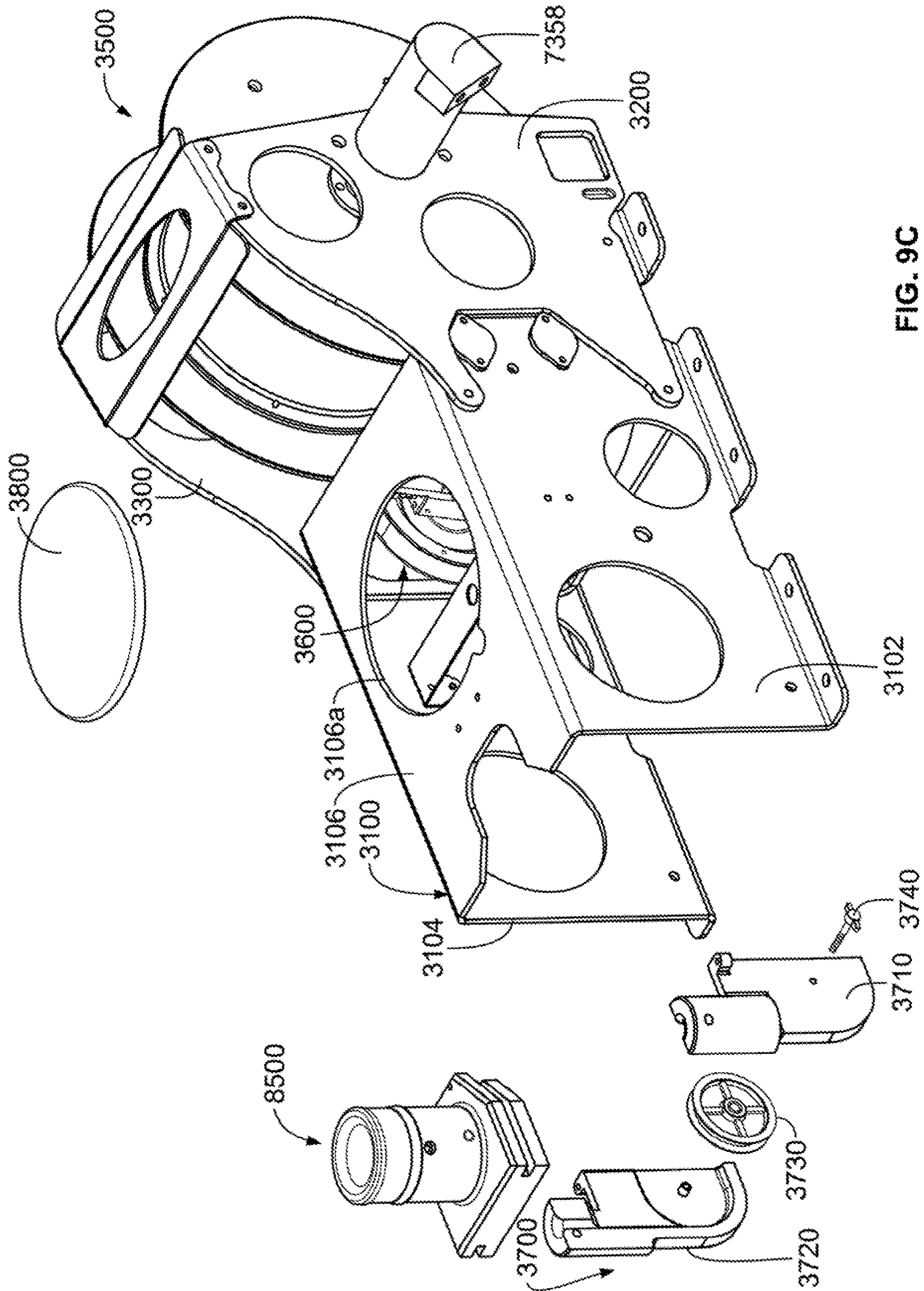


FIG. 9C

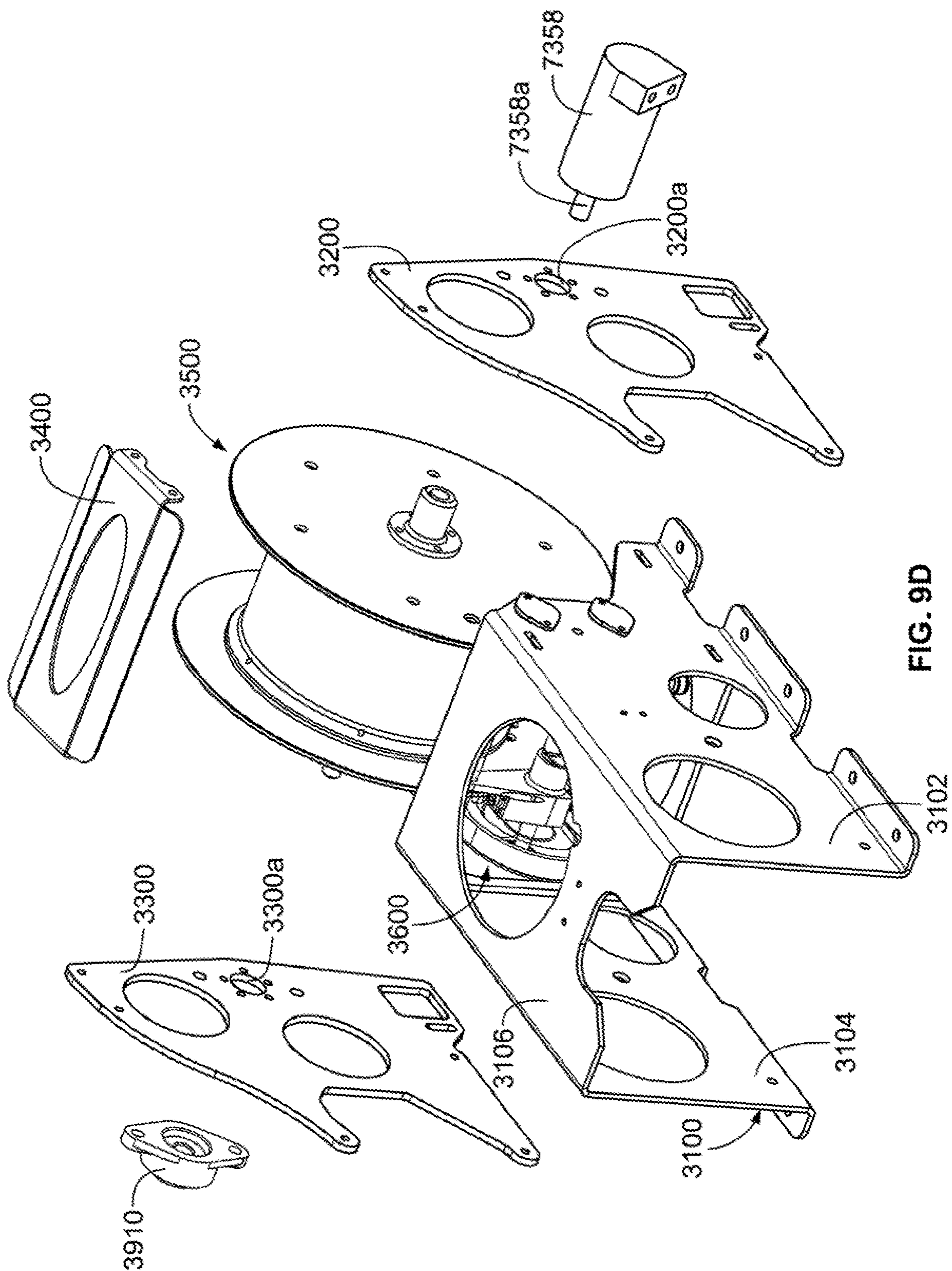


FIG. 9D

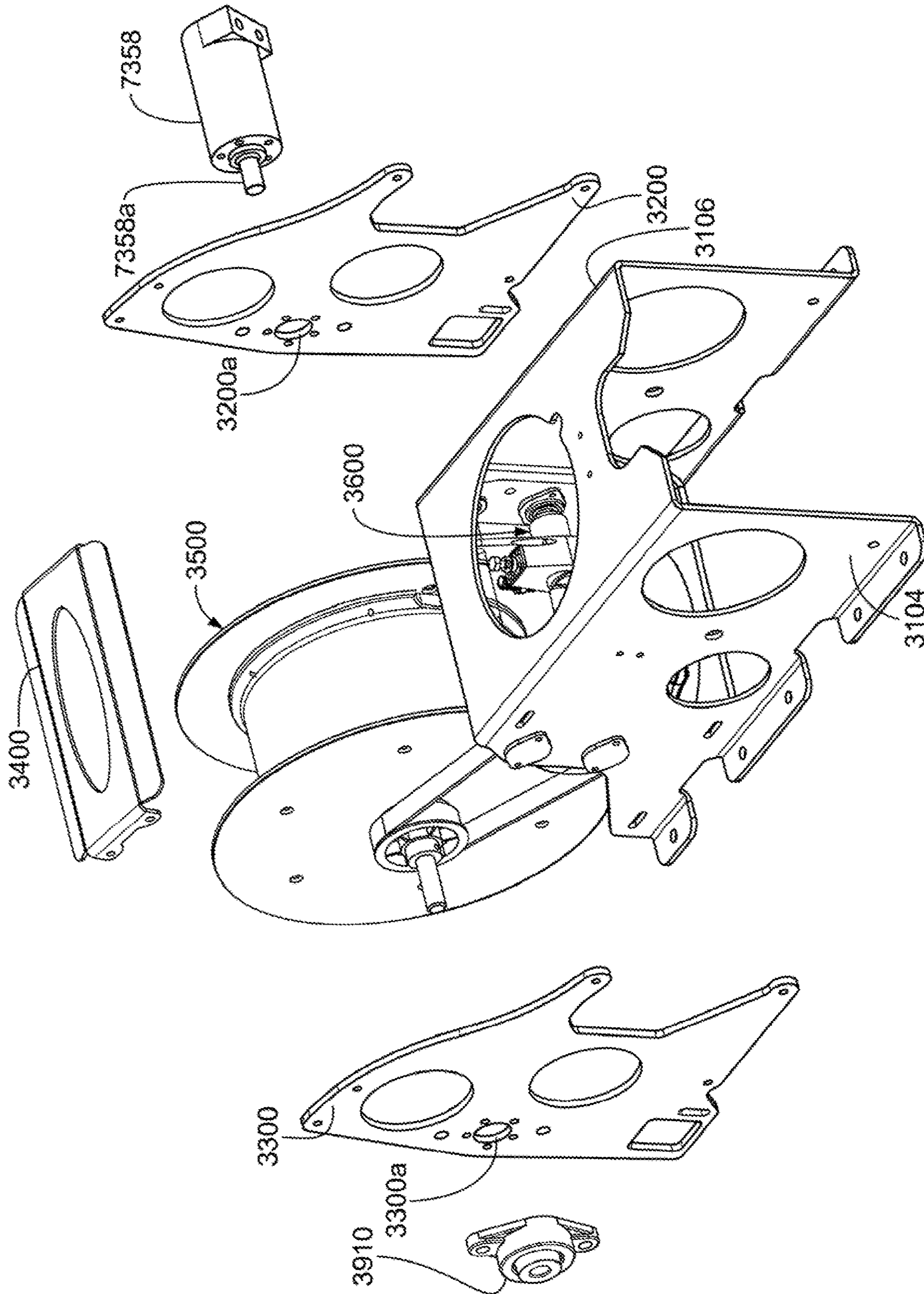


FIG. 9E

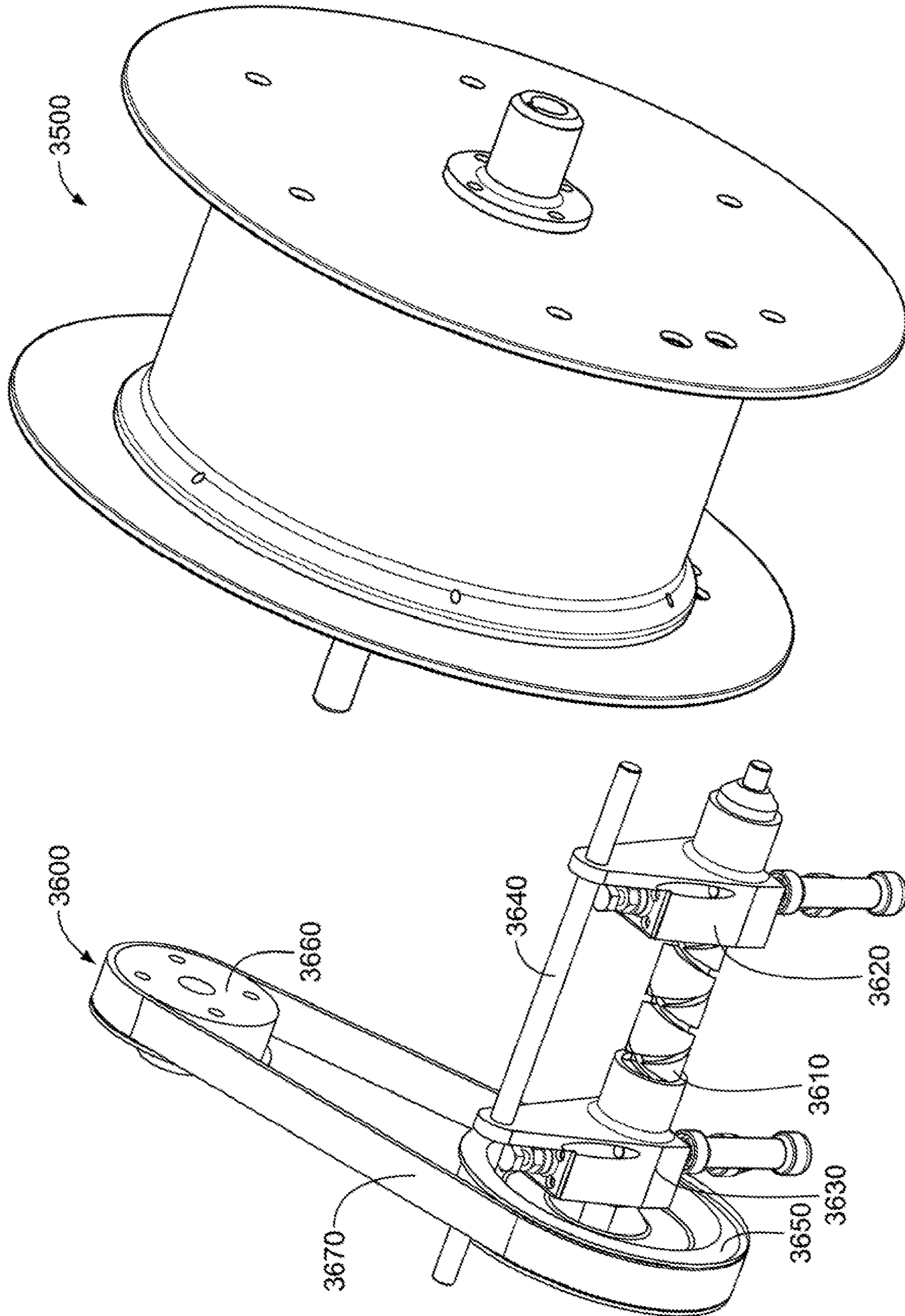


FIG. 9F

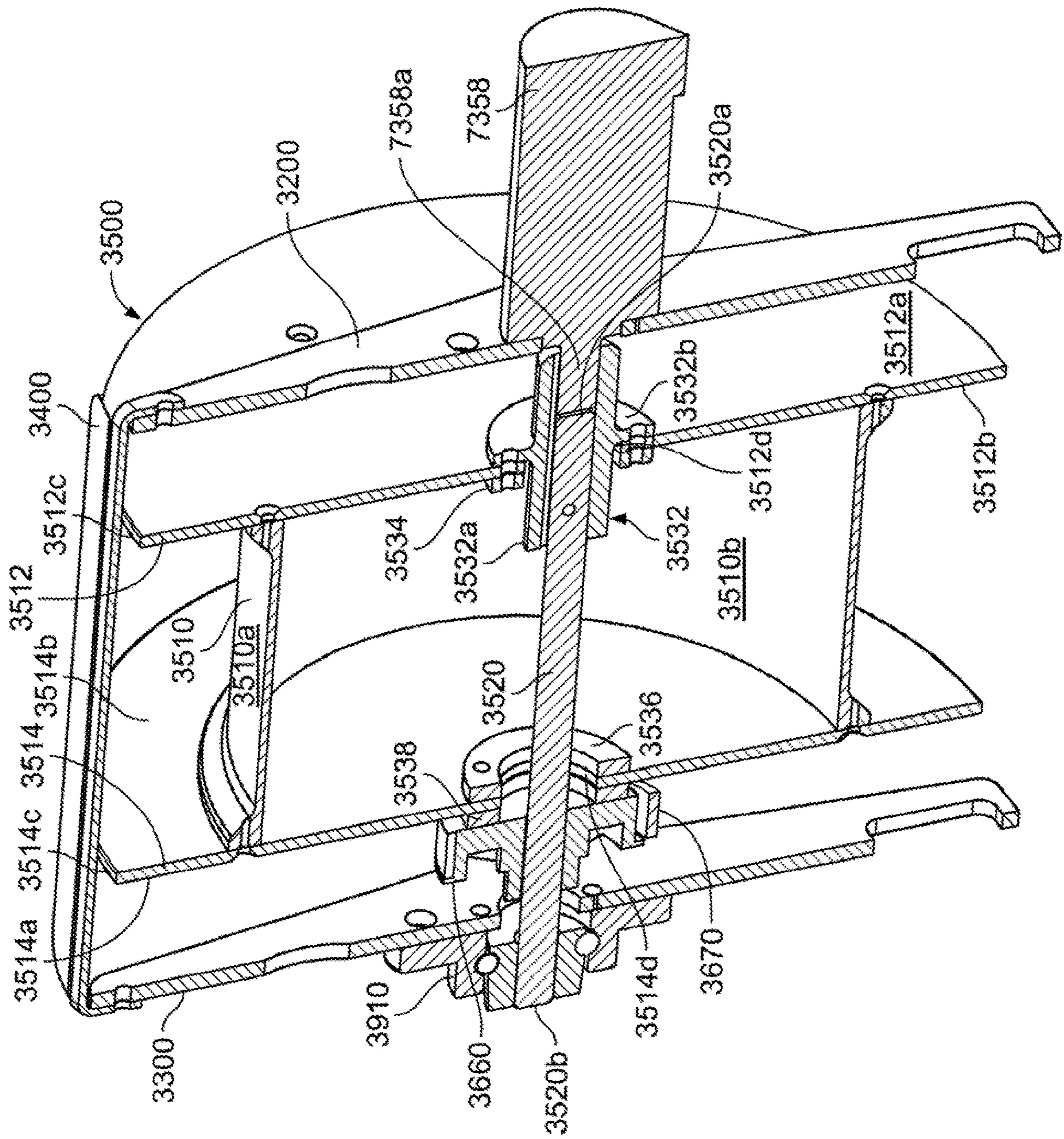


FIG. 9G

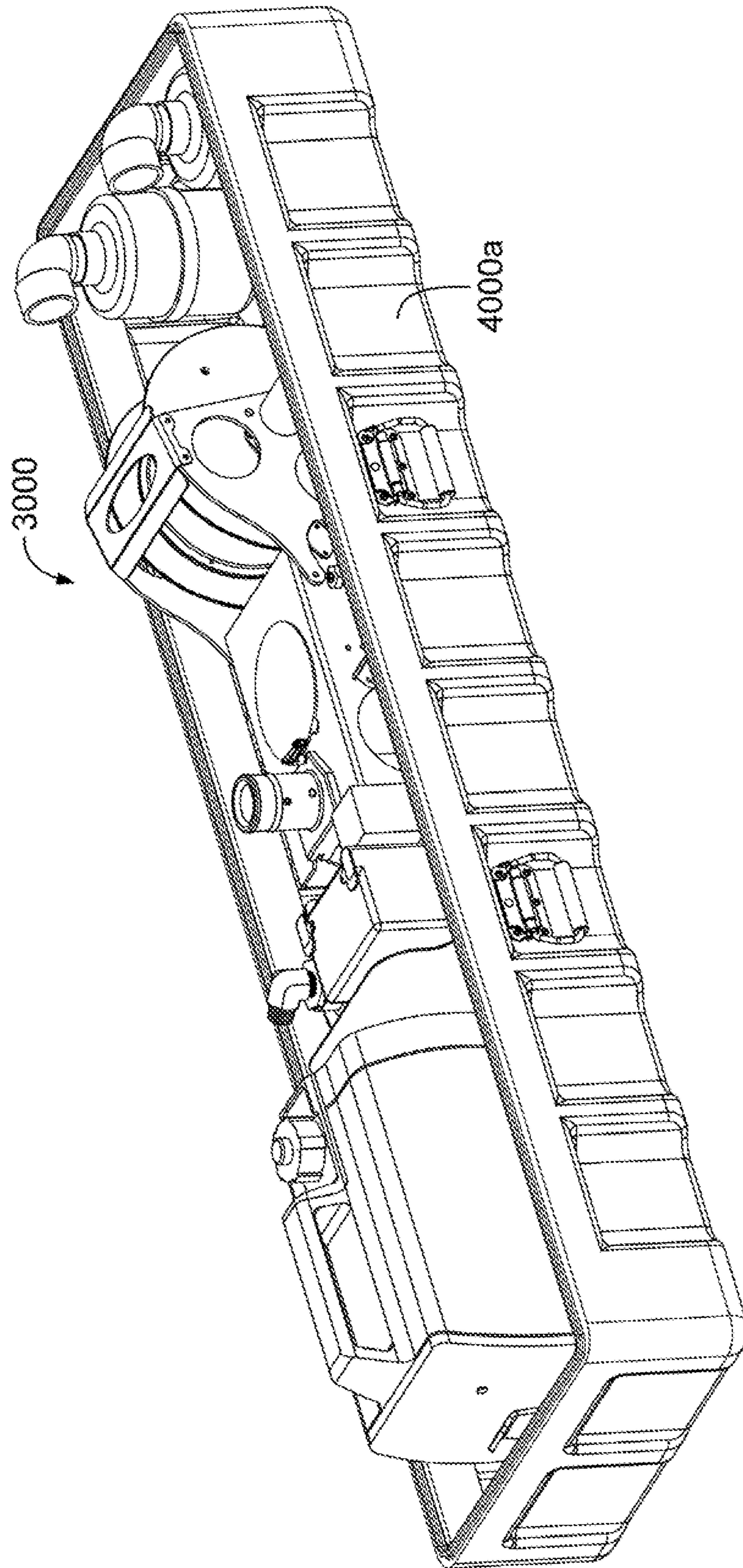


FIG. 9H

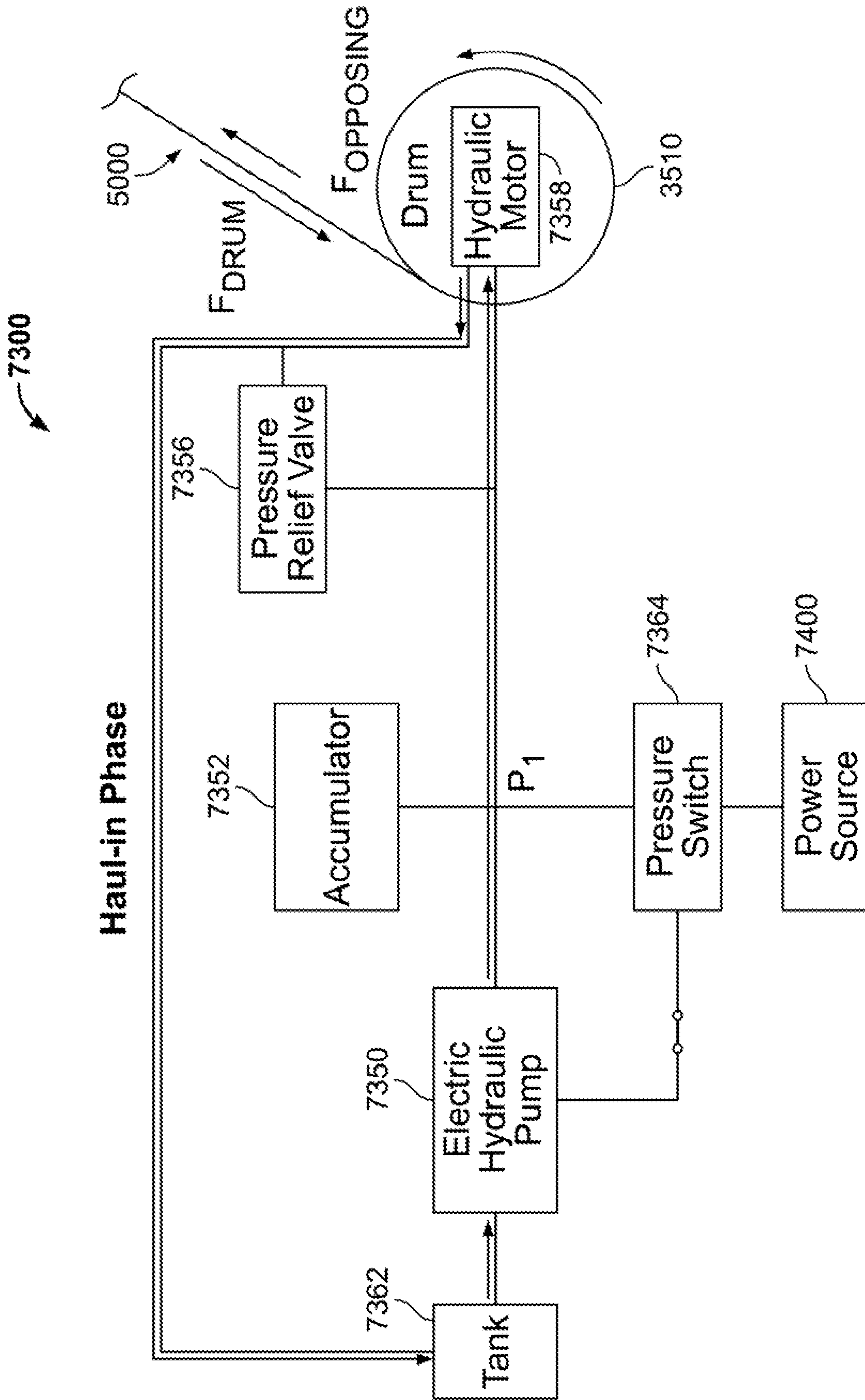


FIG. 10A

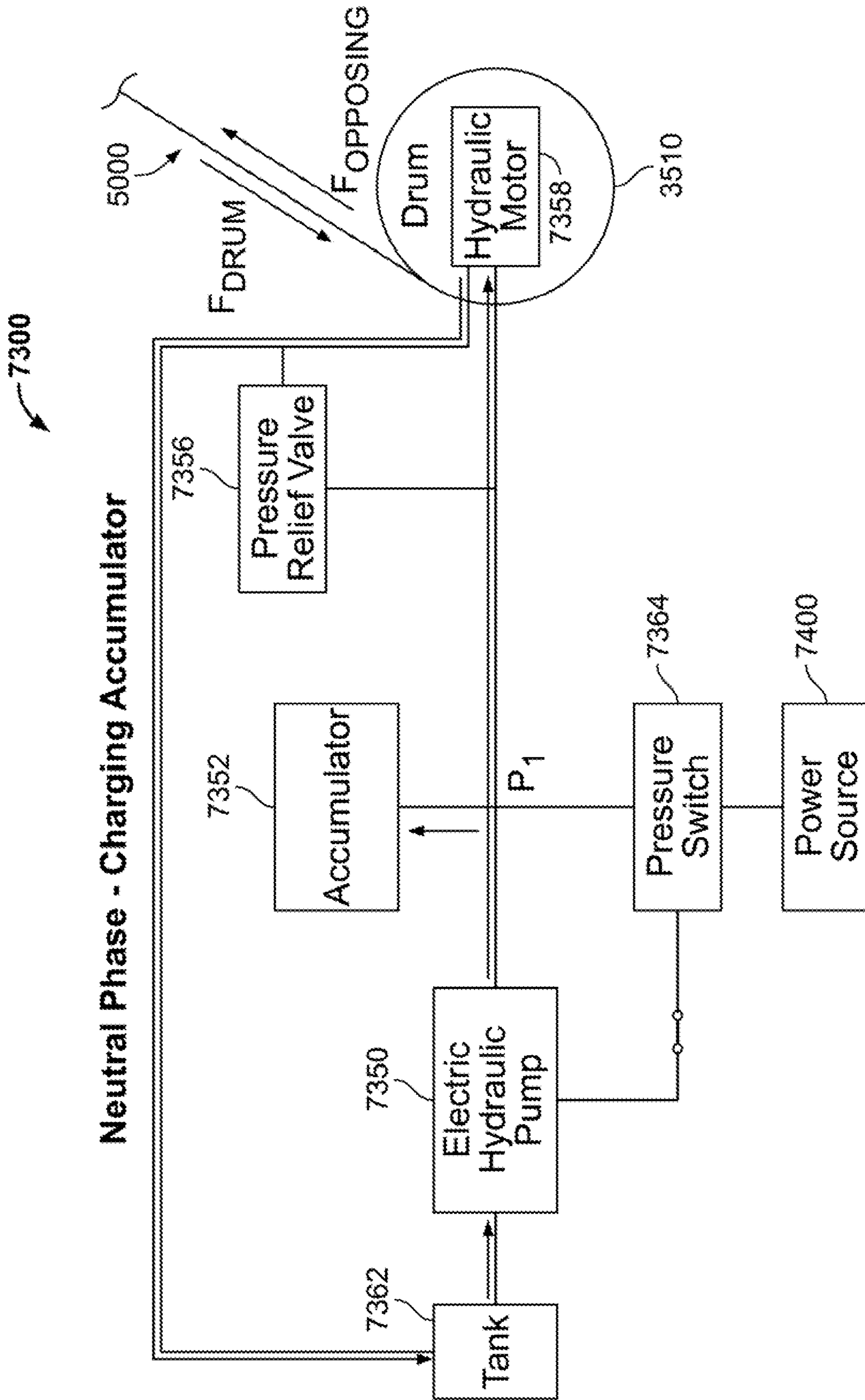


FIG. 10B

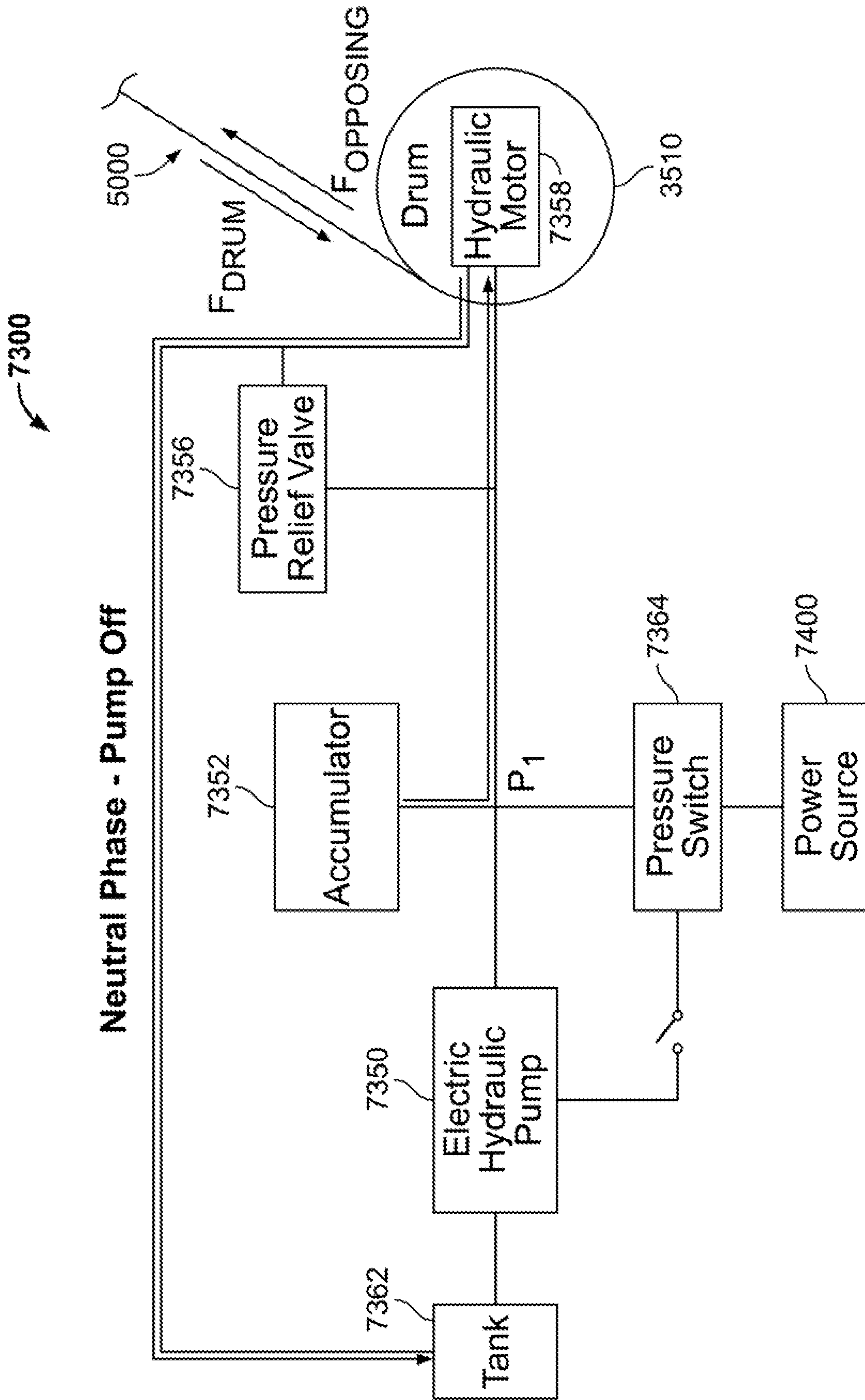


FIG. 10C

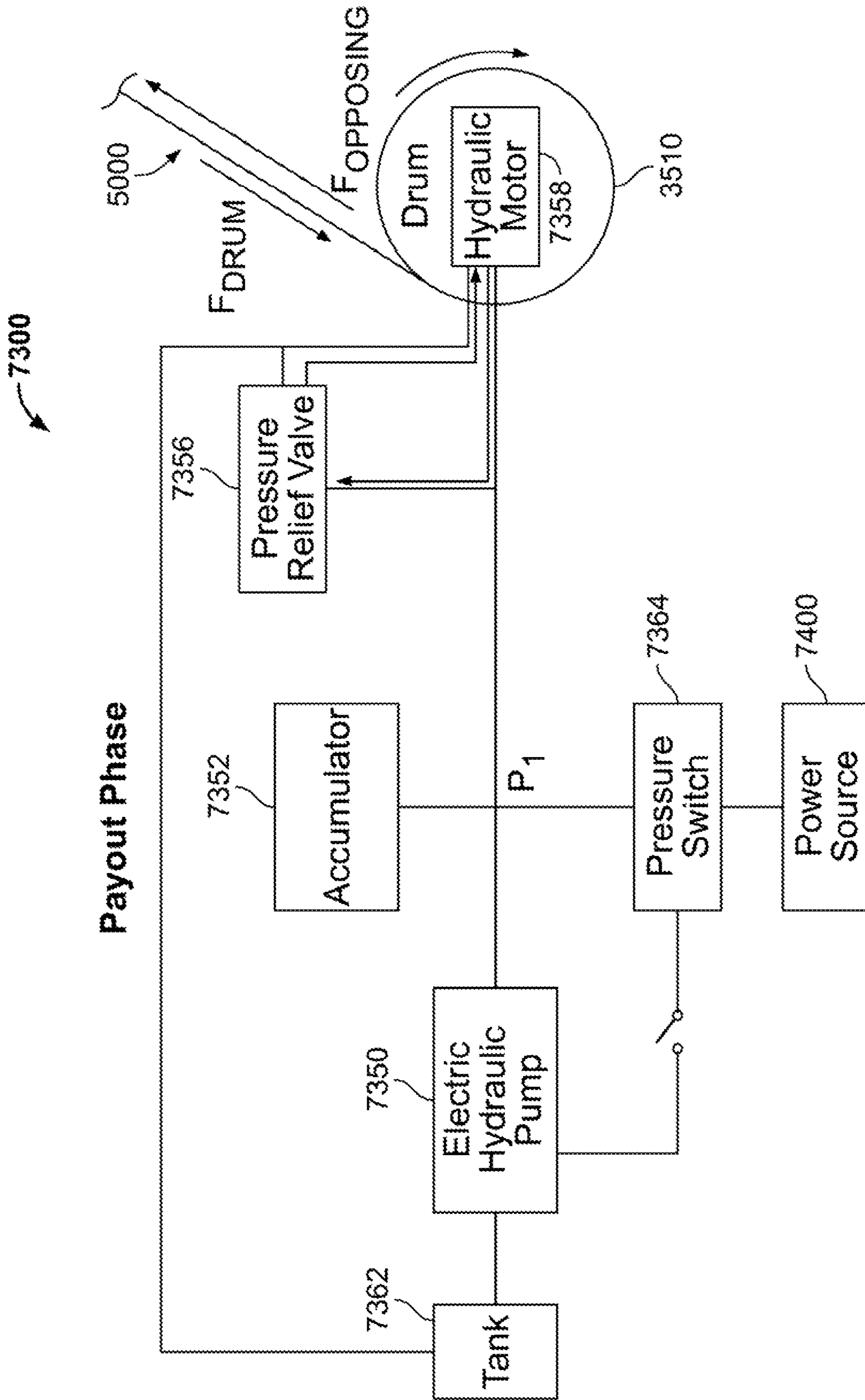


FIG. 10D

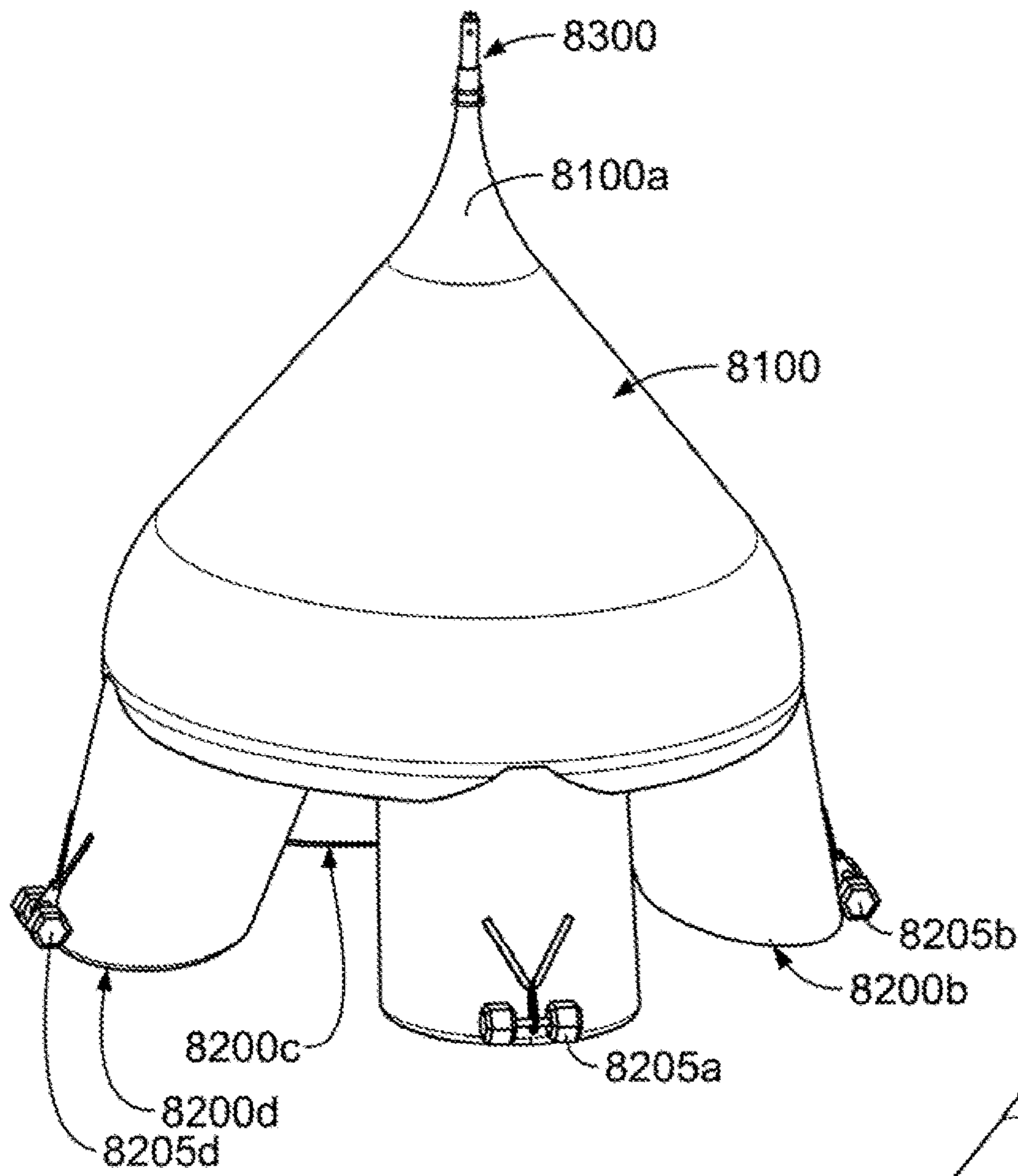


FIG. 11A

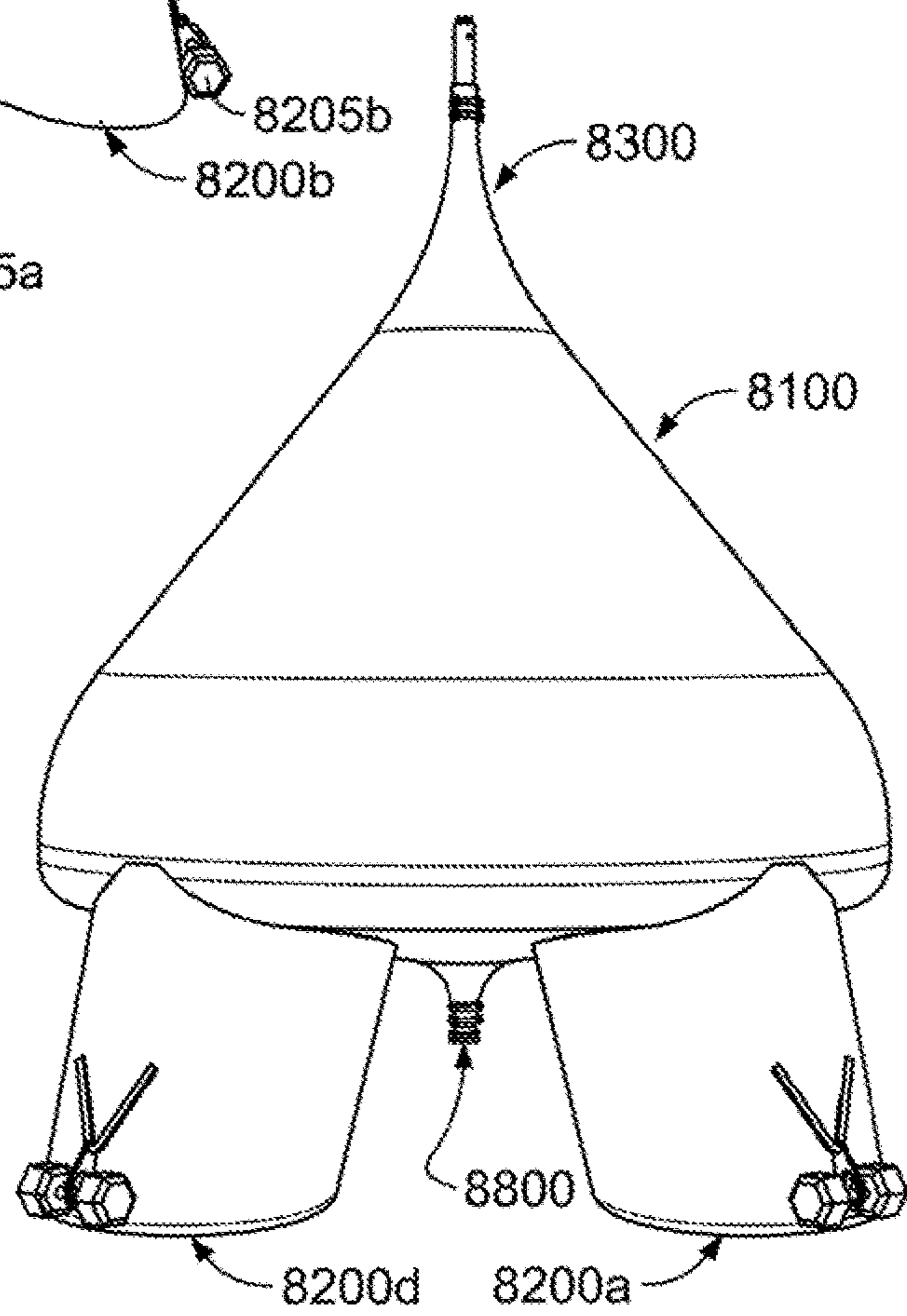


FIG. 11B

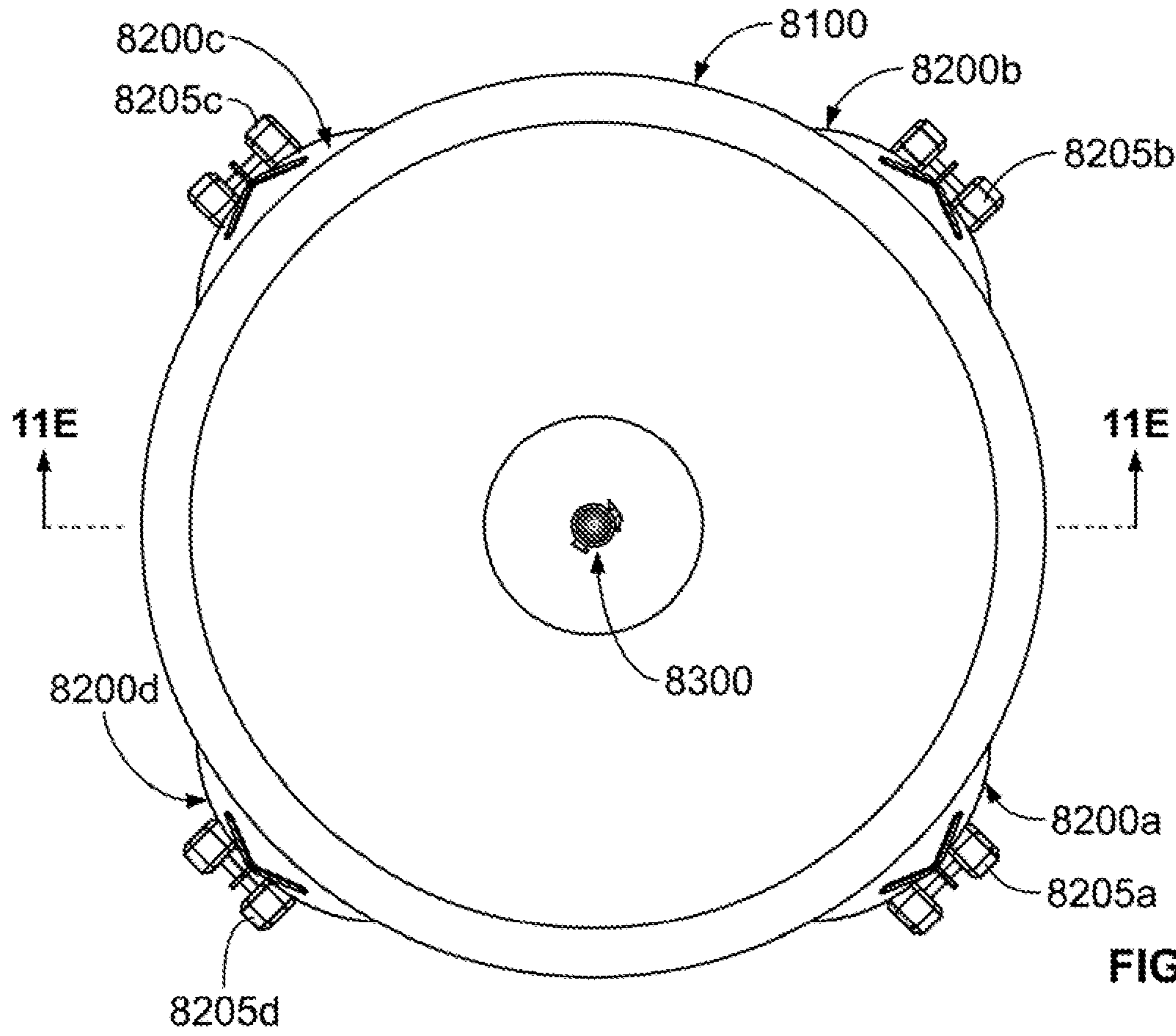


FIG. 11C

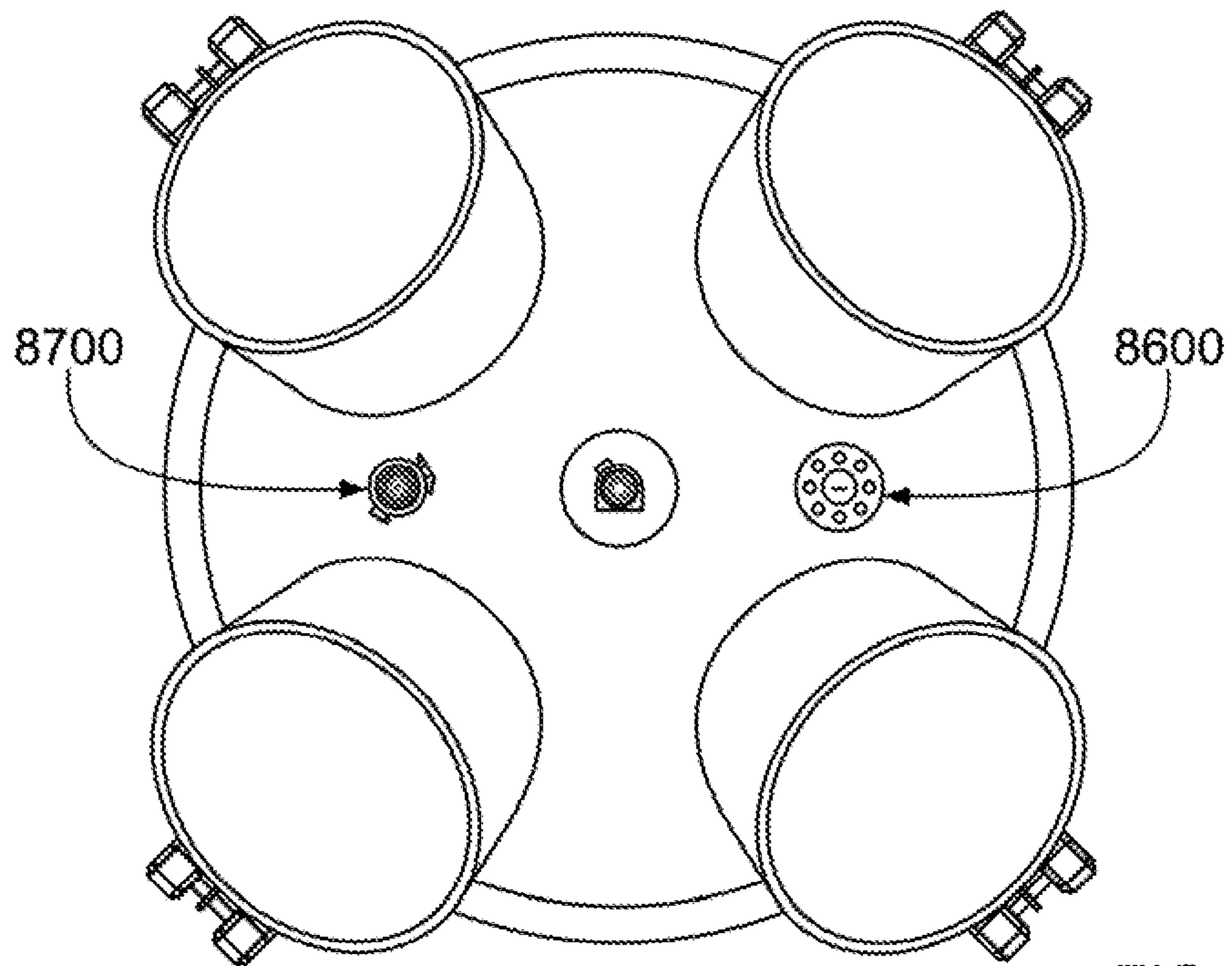


FIG. 11D

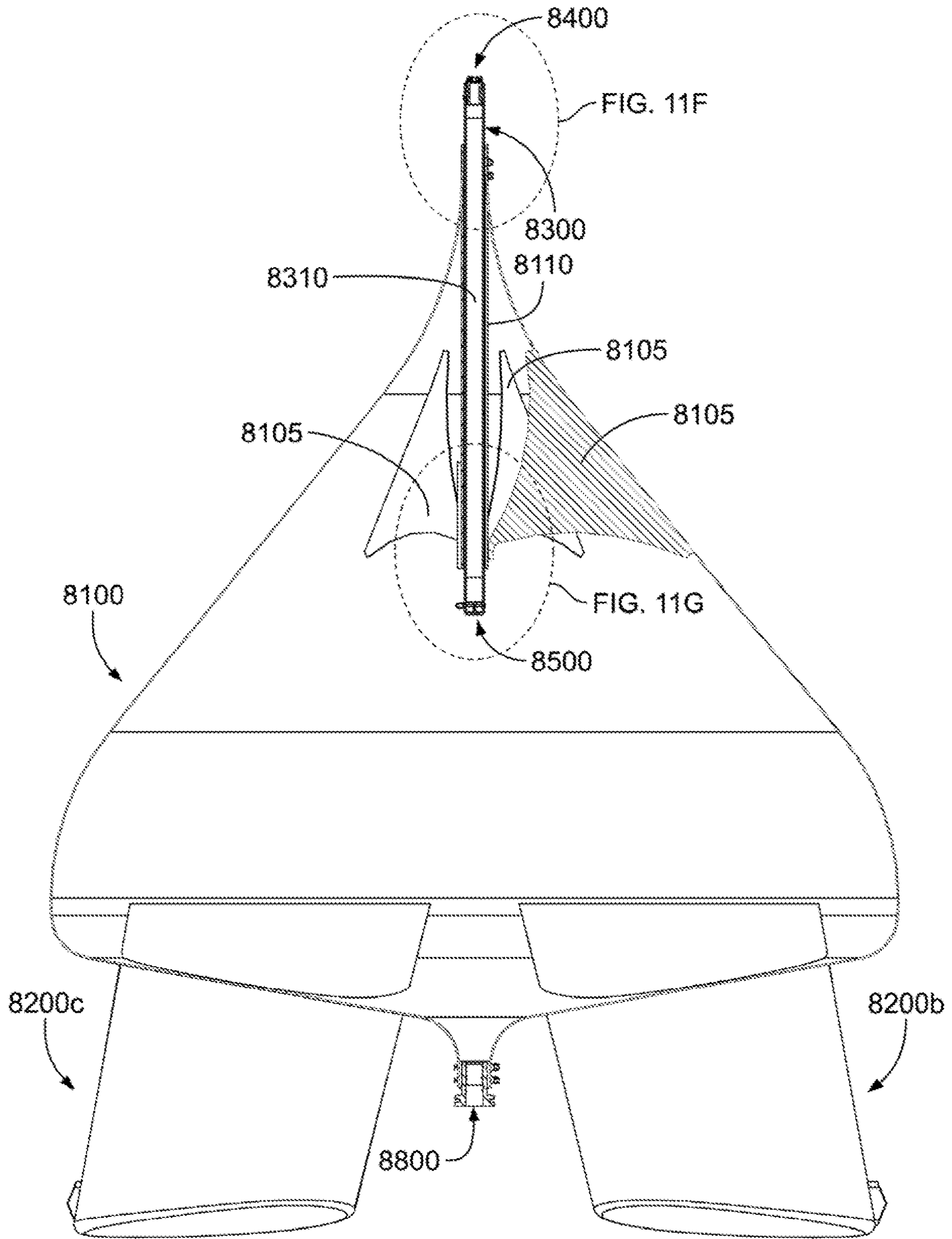


FIG. 11E

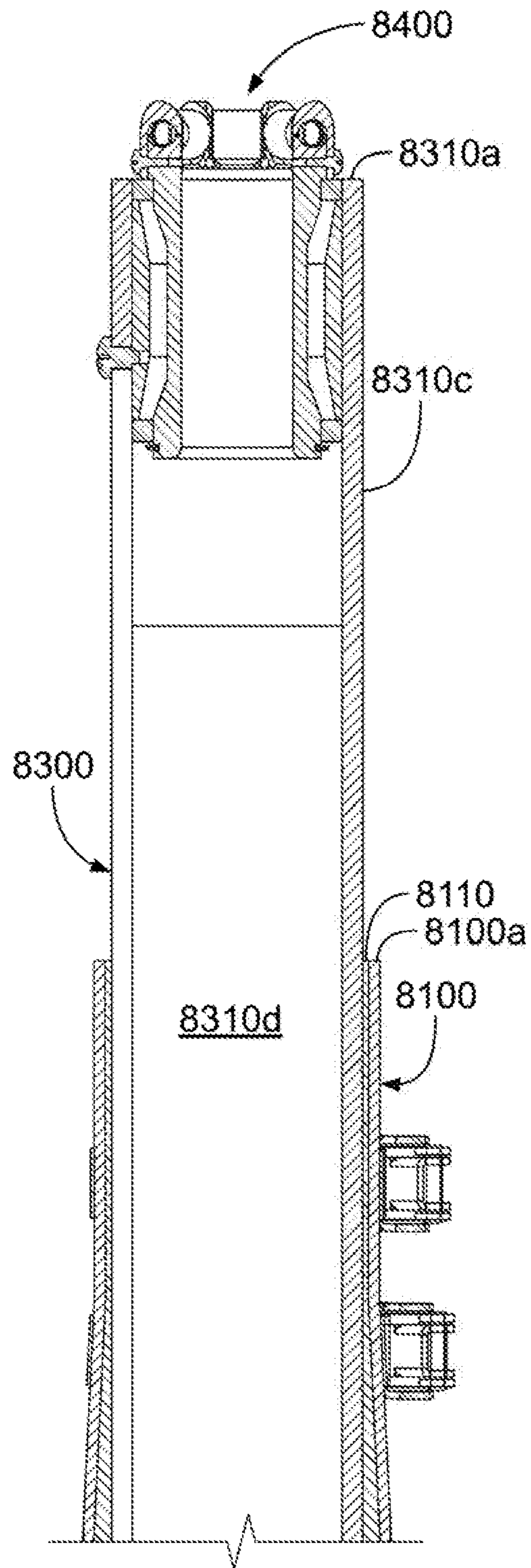


FIG. 11F

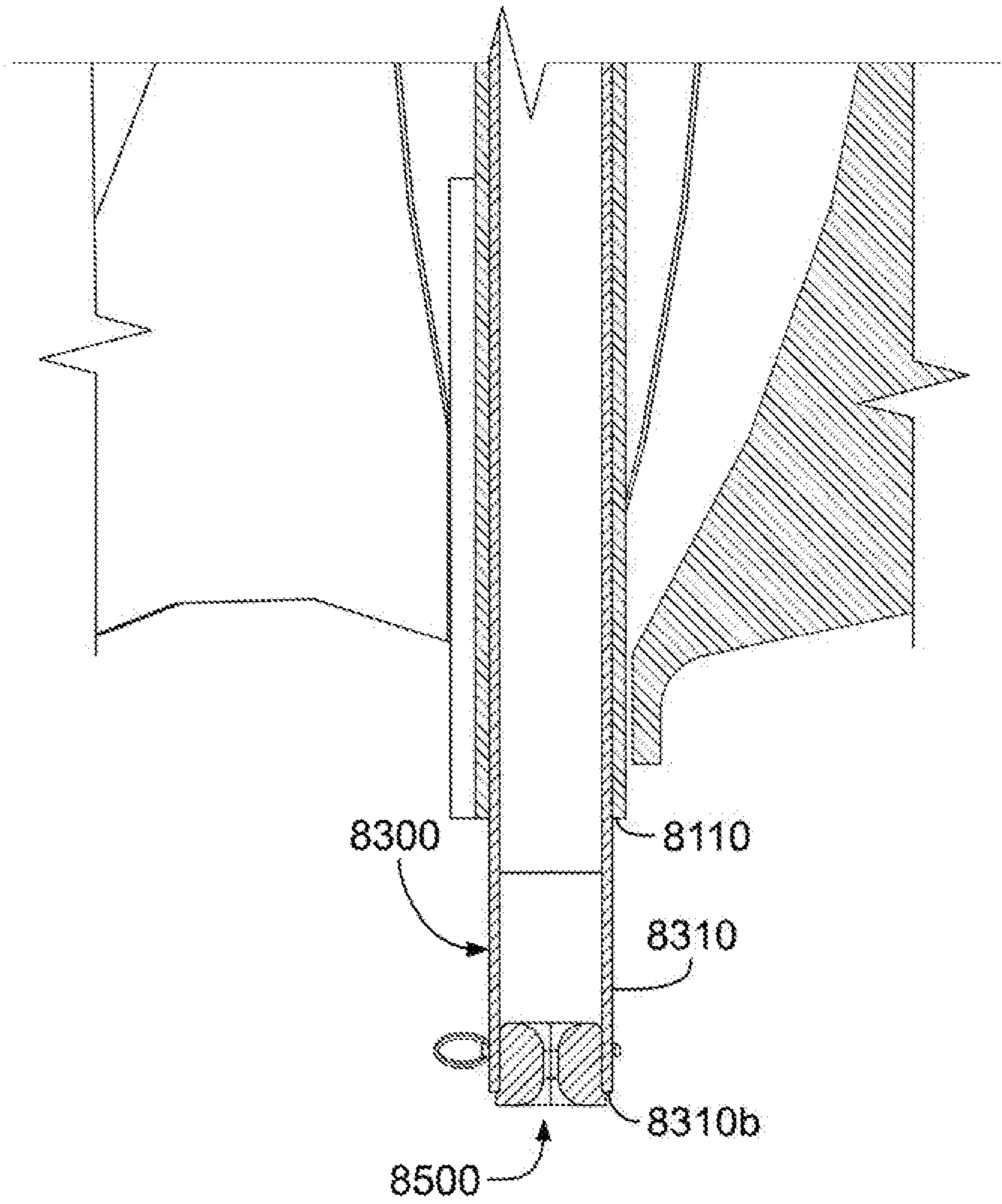


FIG. 11G

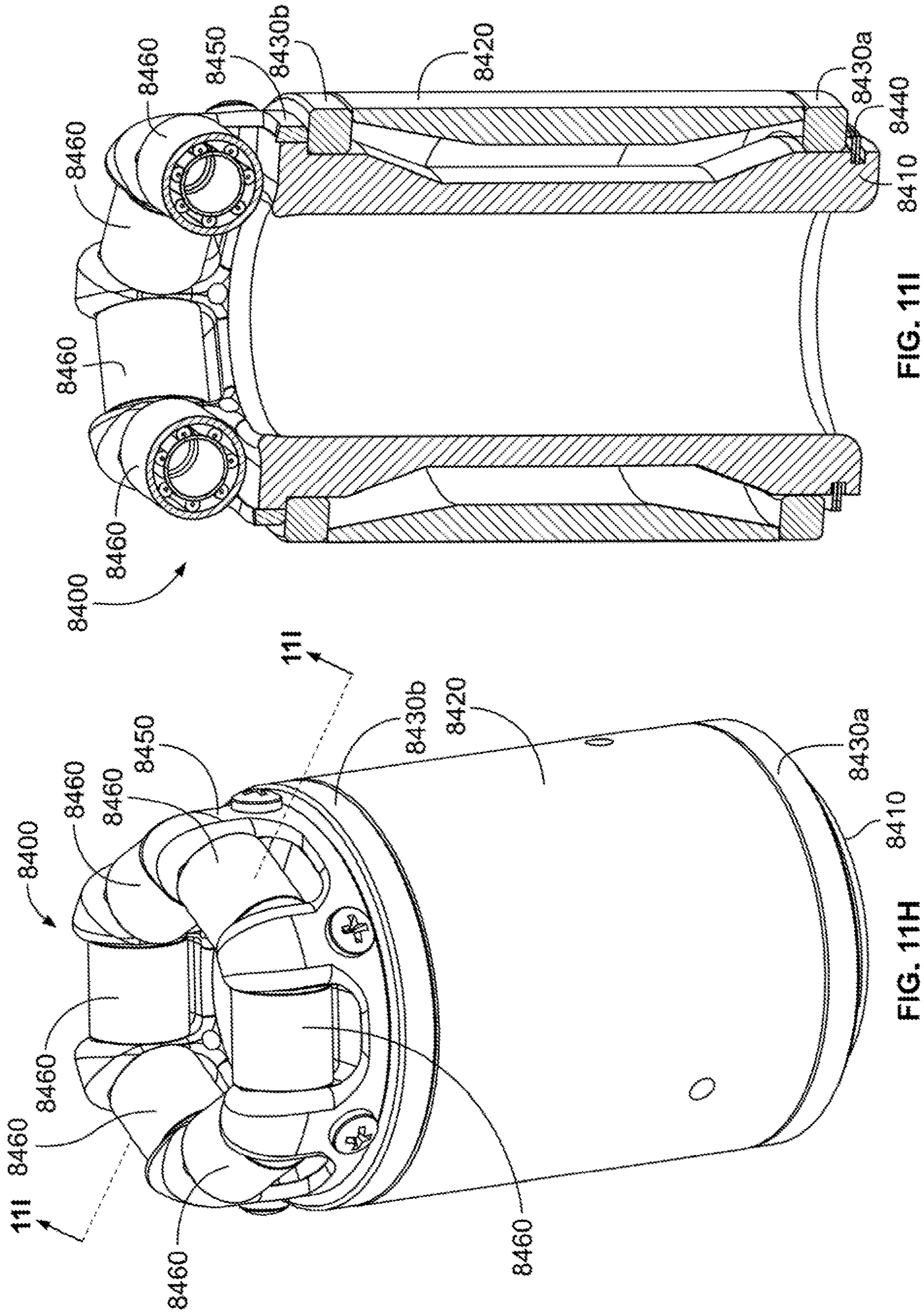


FIG. 11I

FIG. 11H

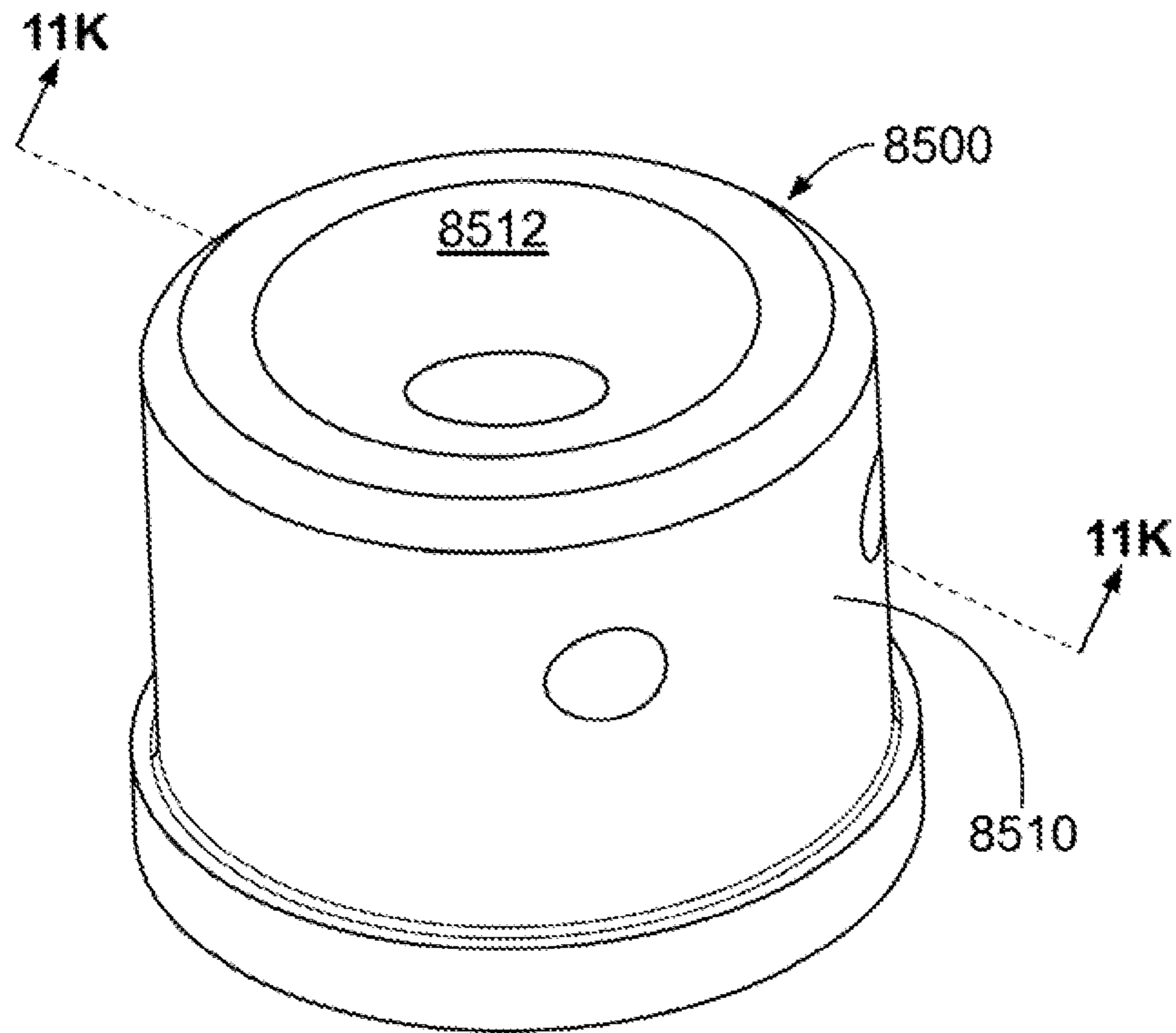


FIG. 11J

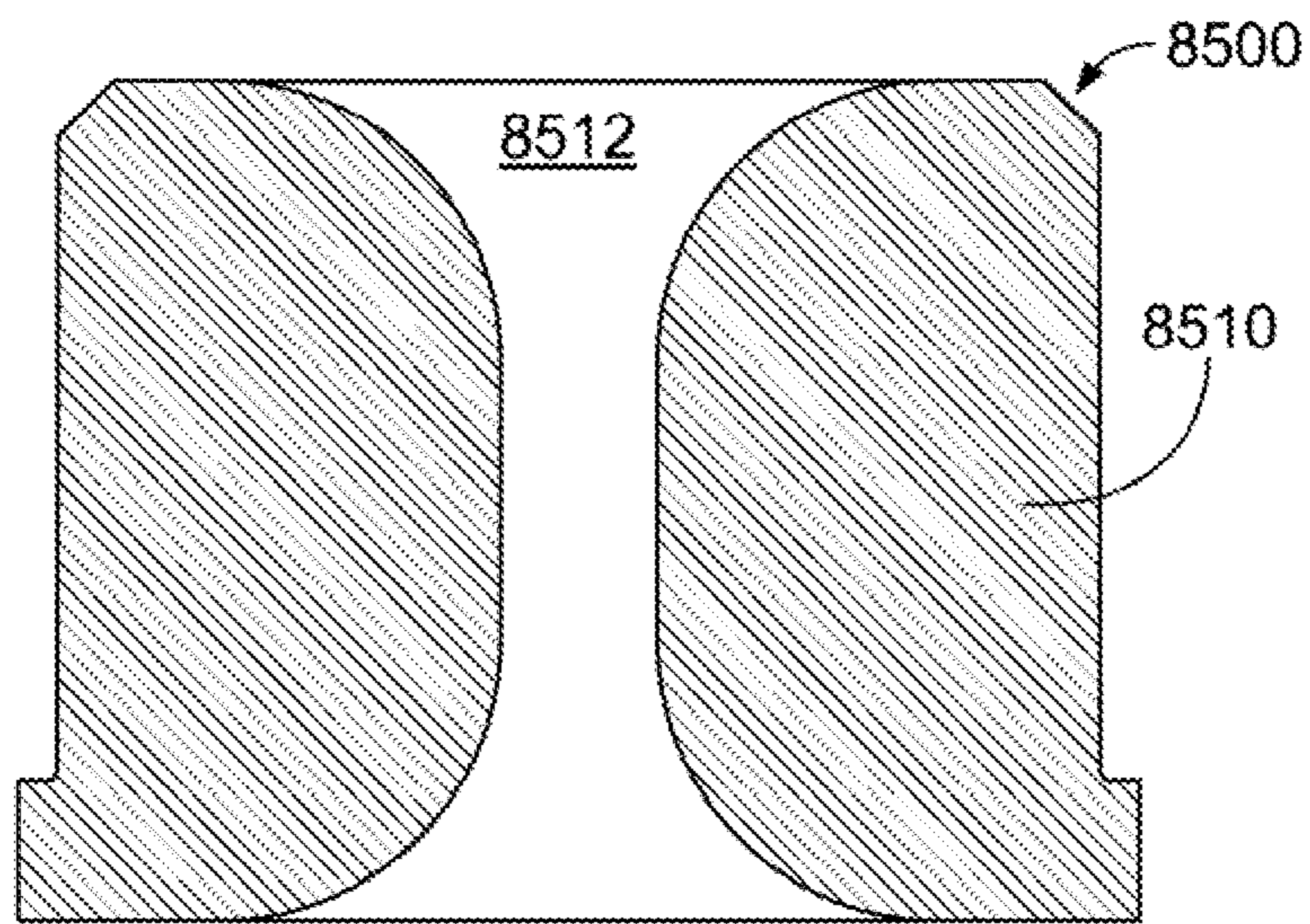
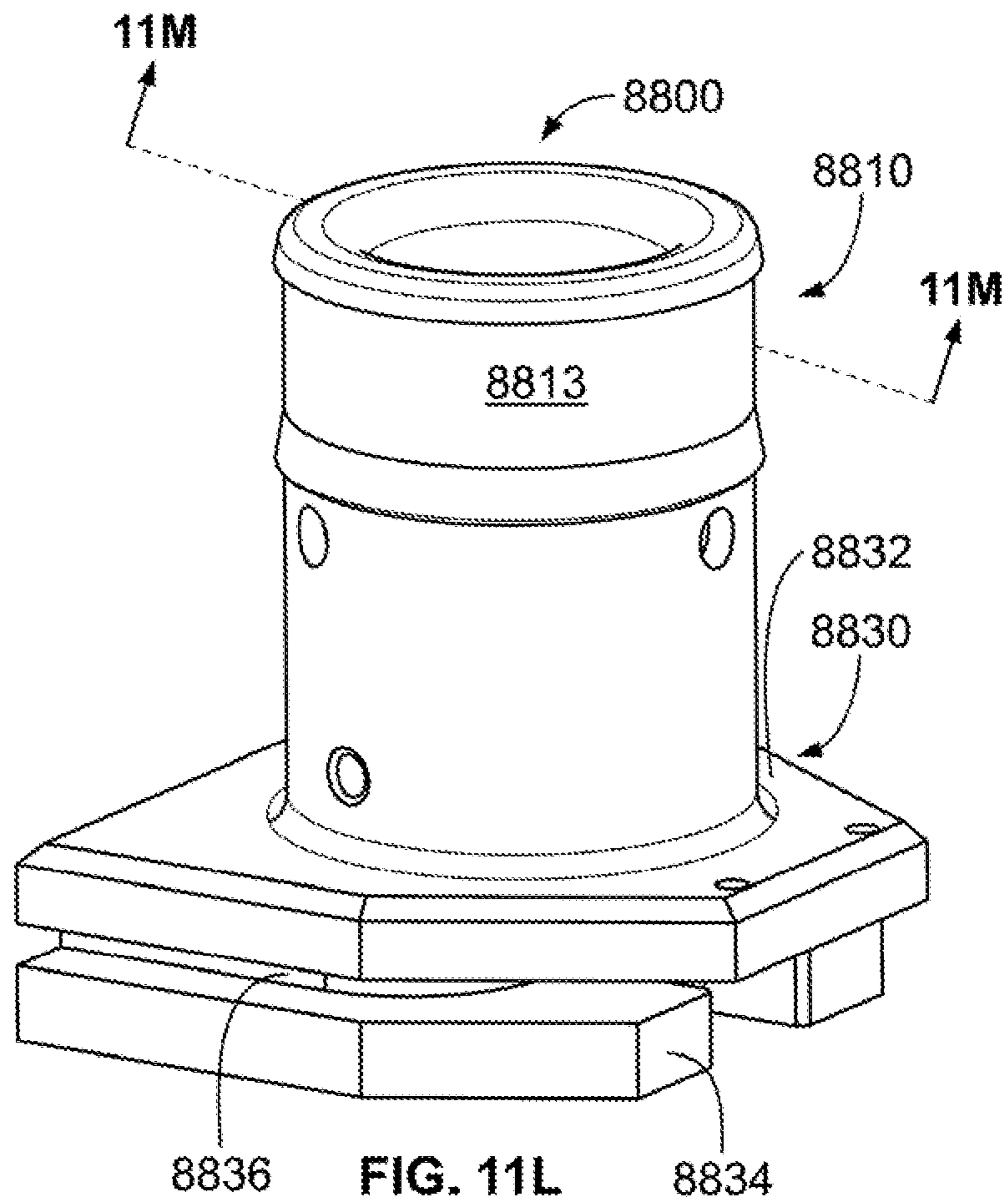


FIG. 11K



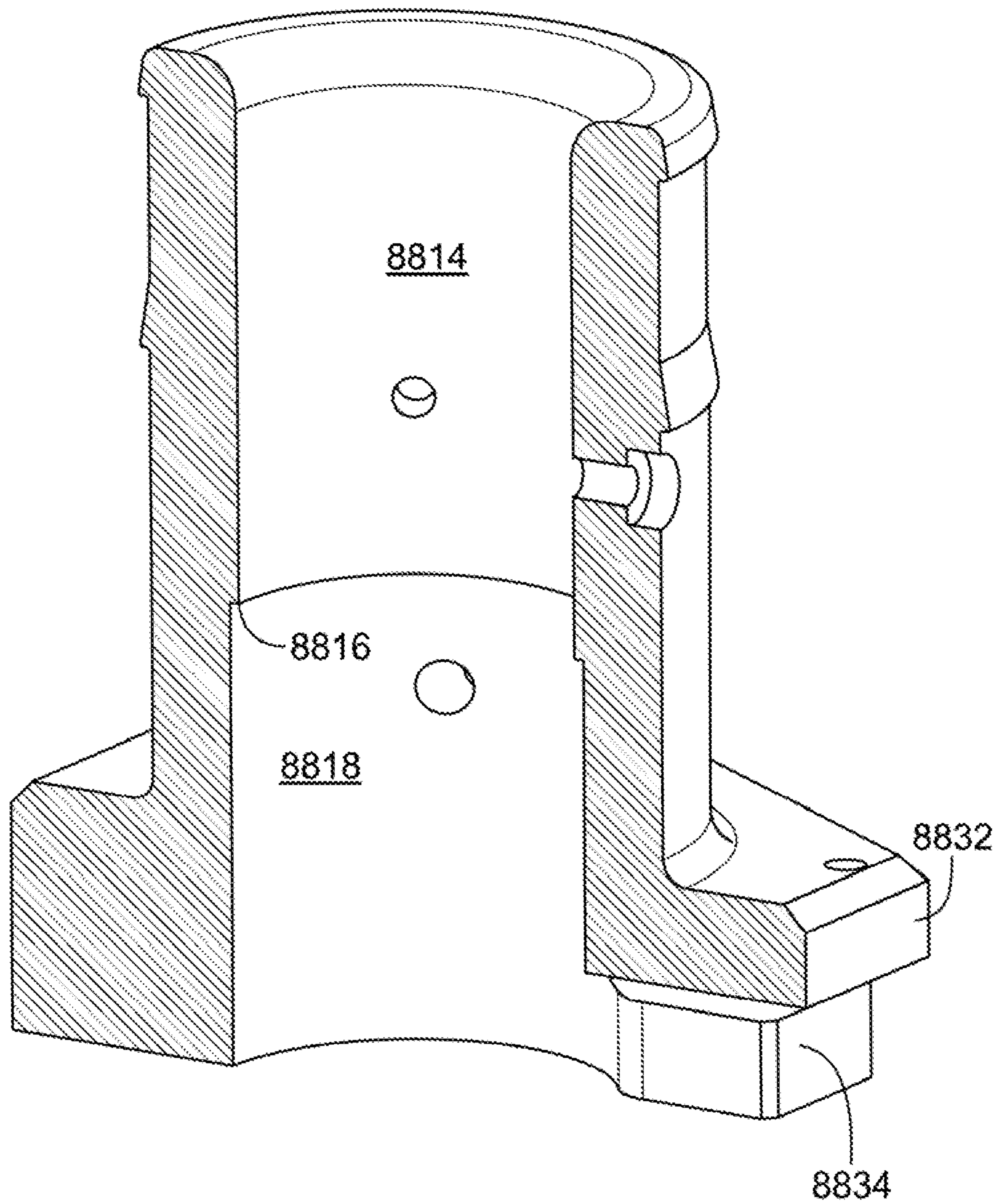


FIG. 11M

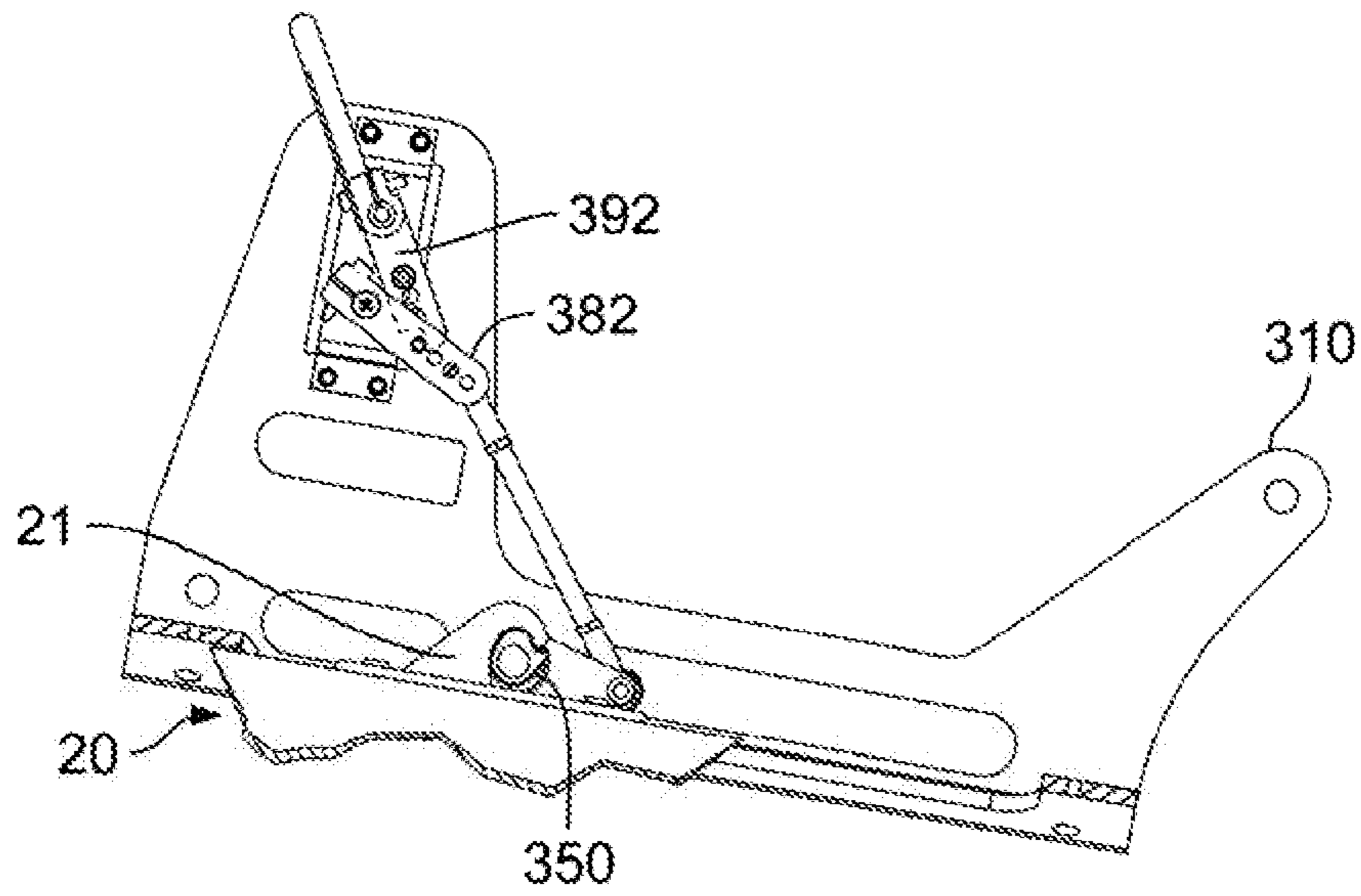


FIG. 12A

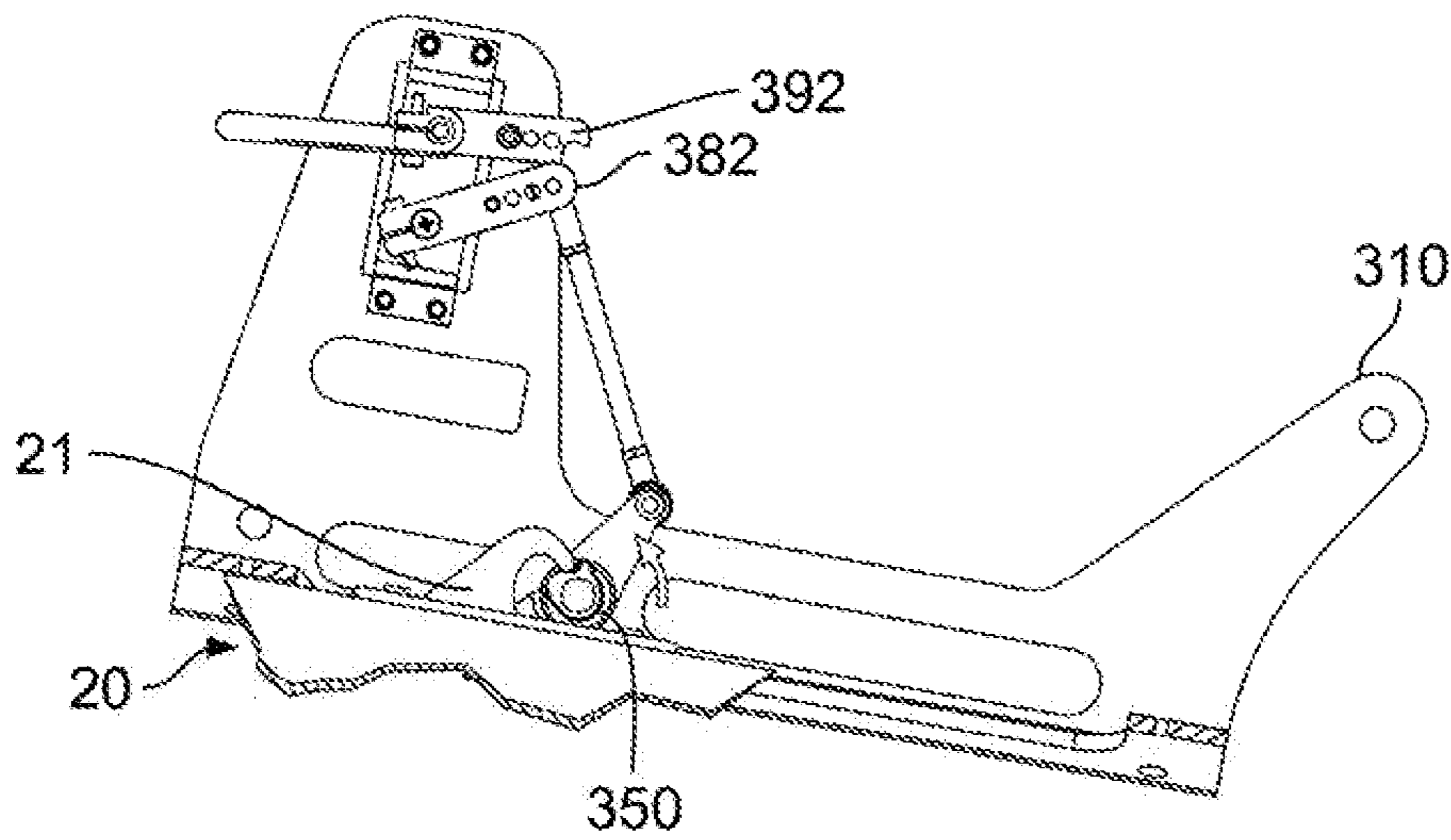


FIG. 12B

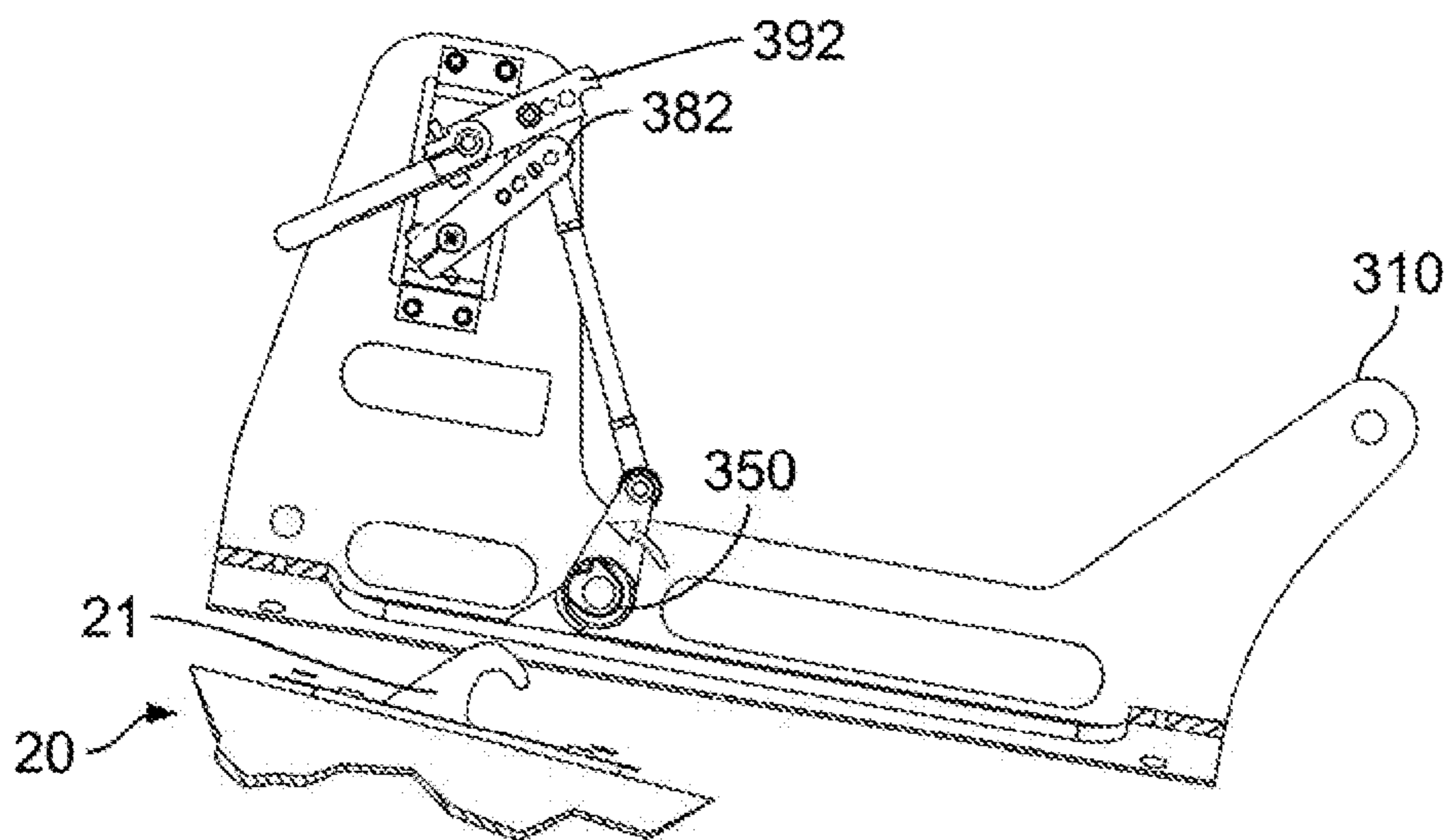


FIG. 12C

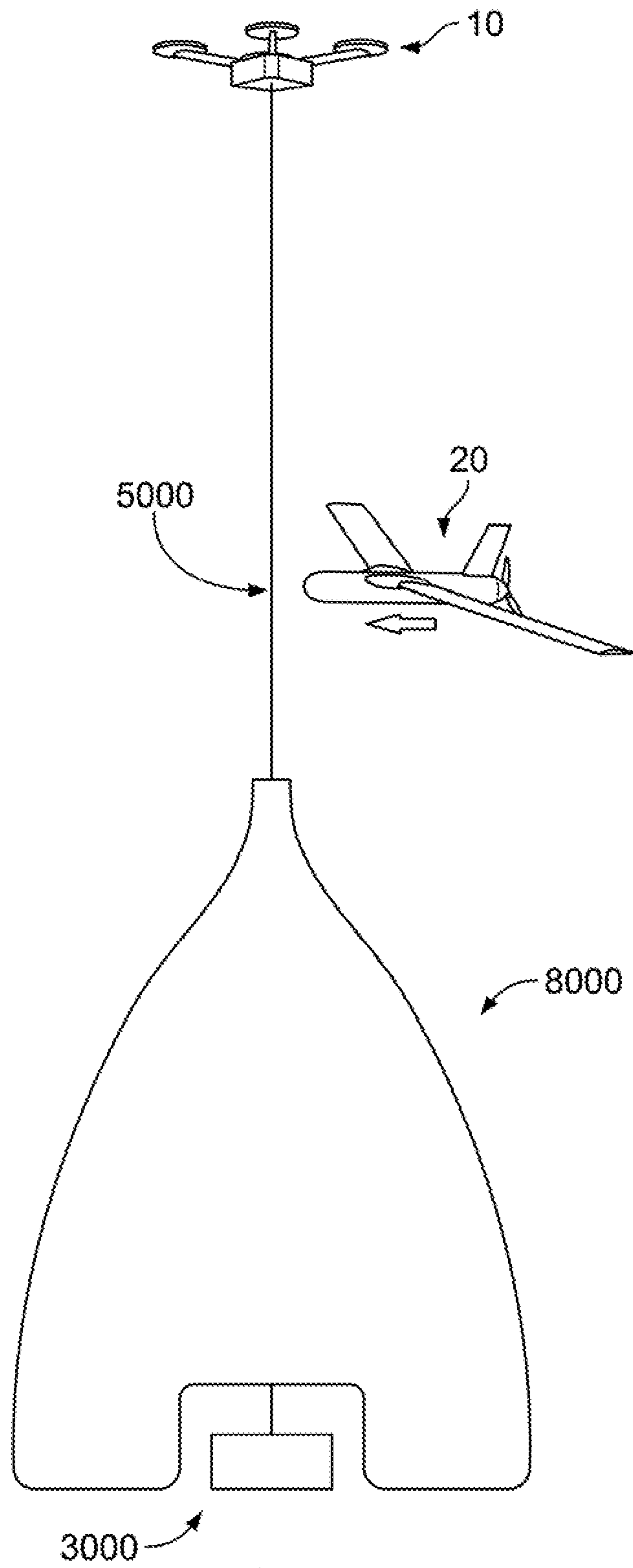


FIG. 12D

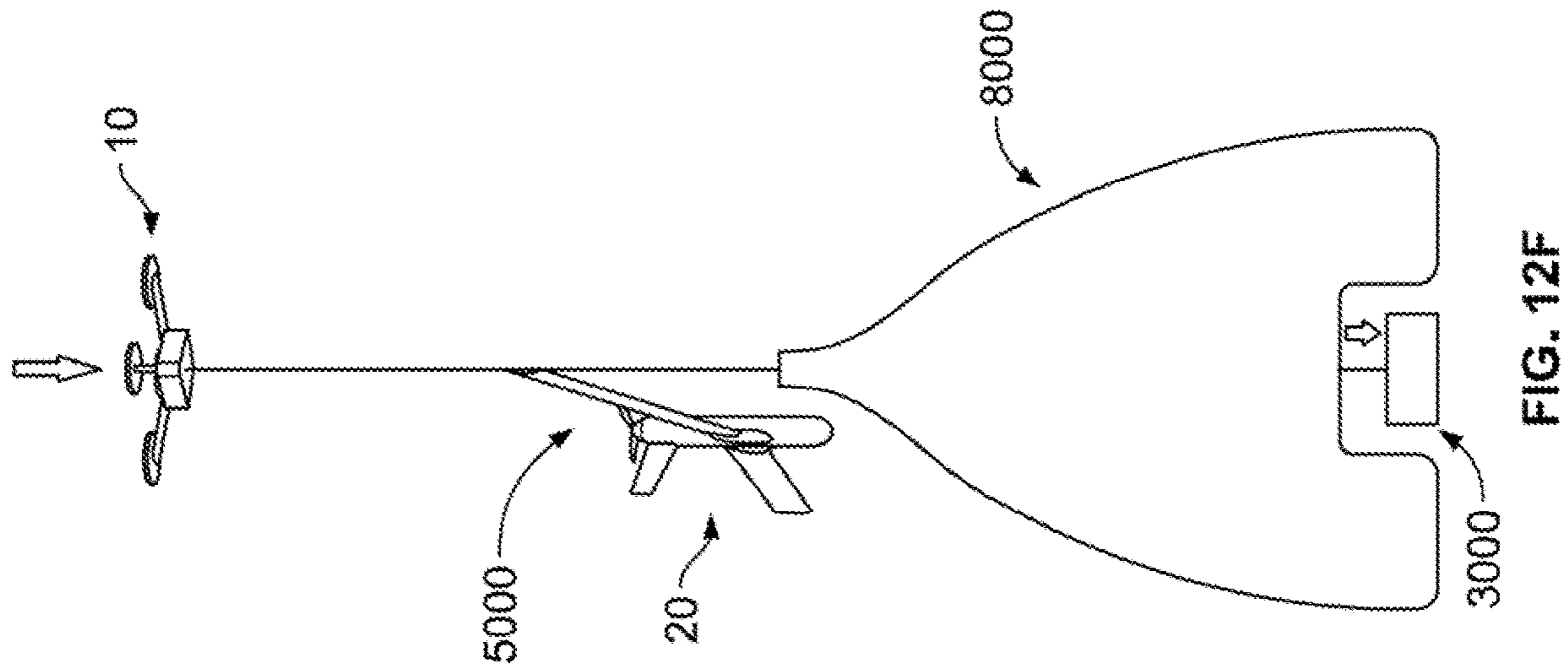


FIG. 12F

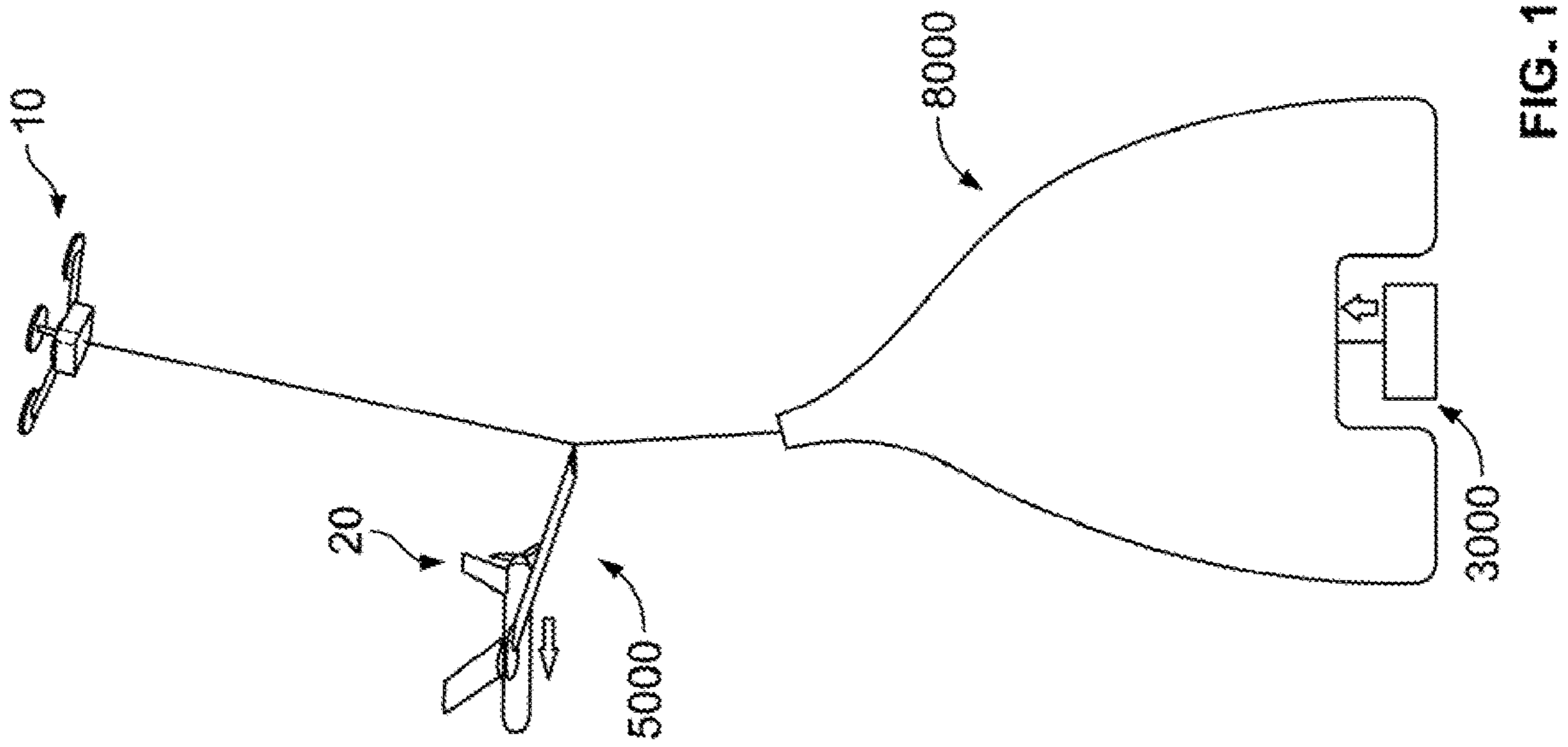


FIG. 12E

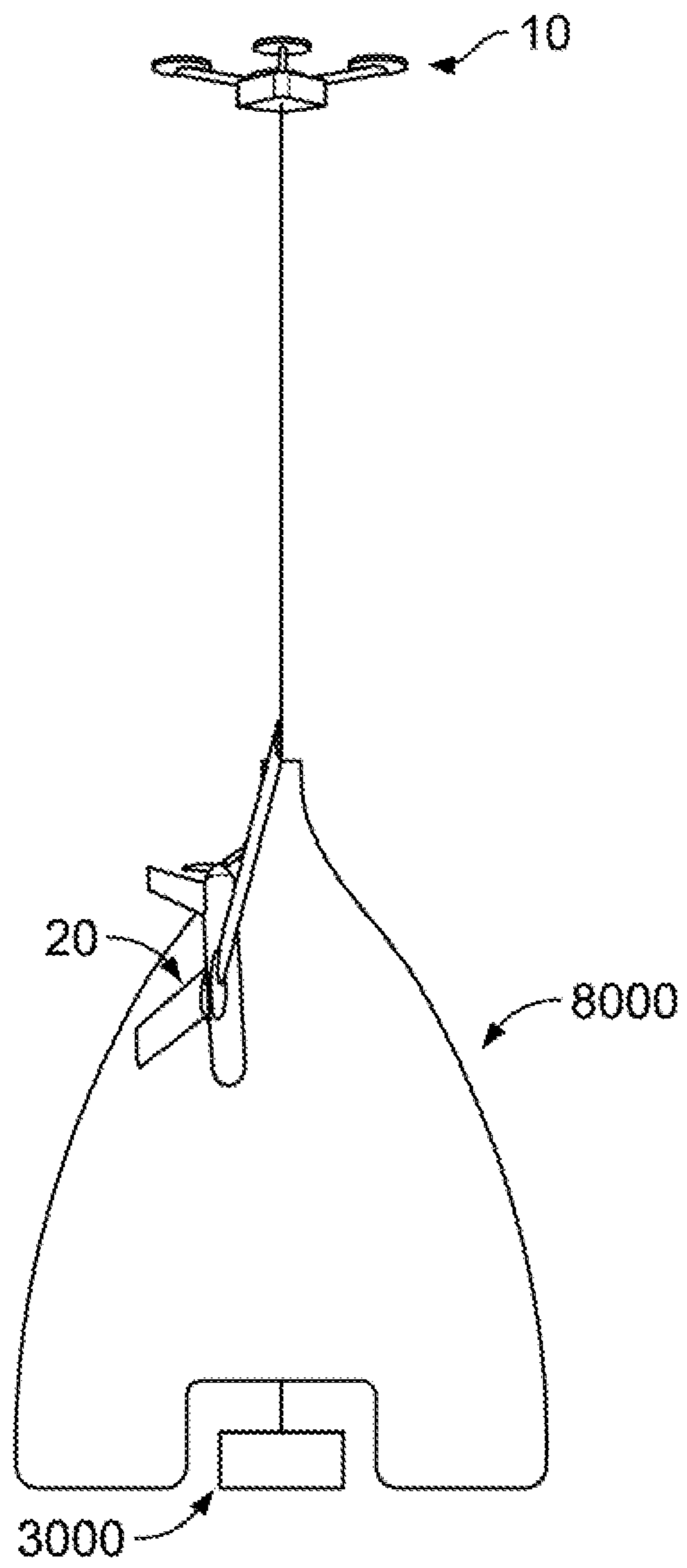


FIG. 12G

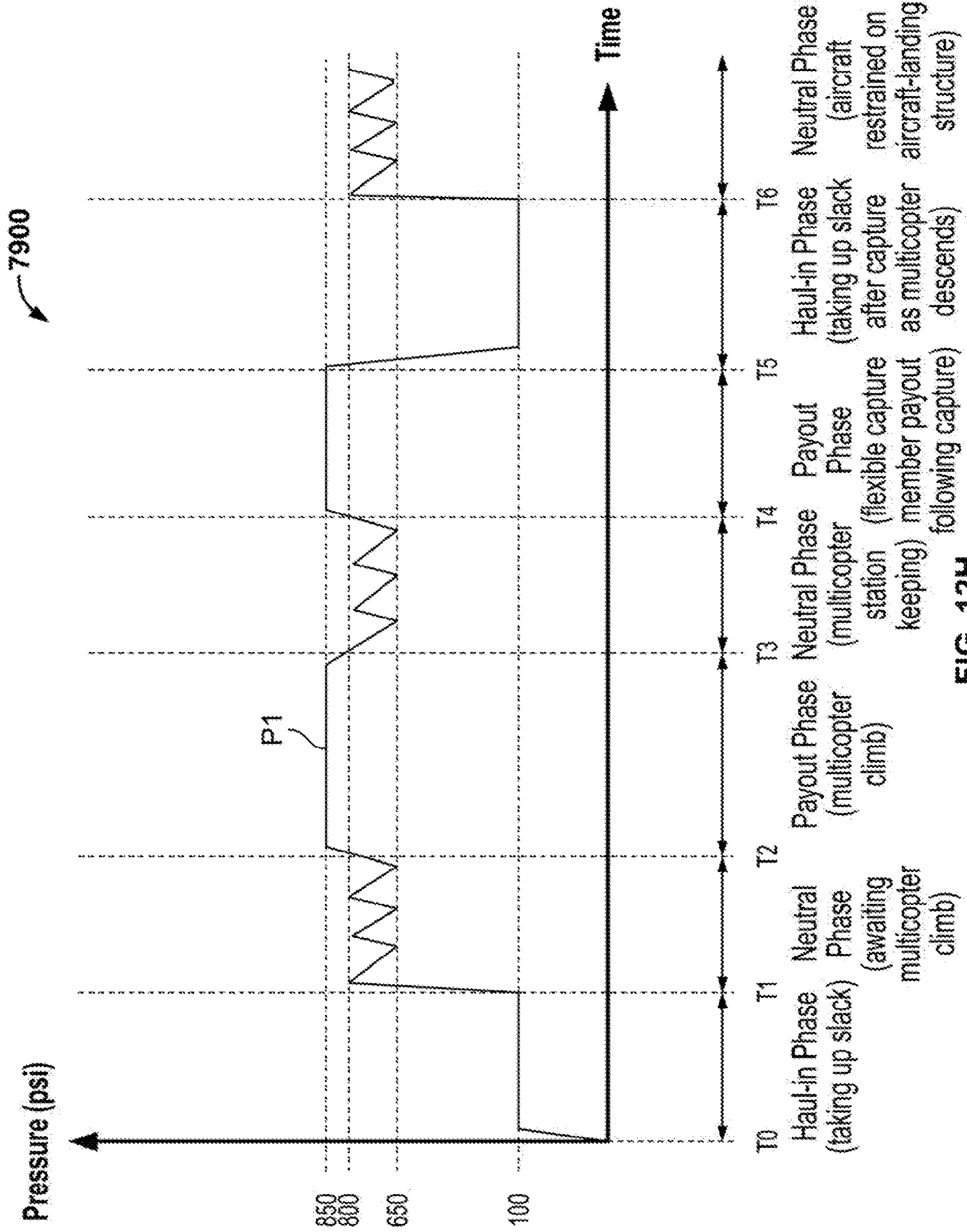


FIG. 12H

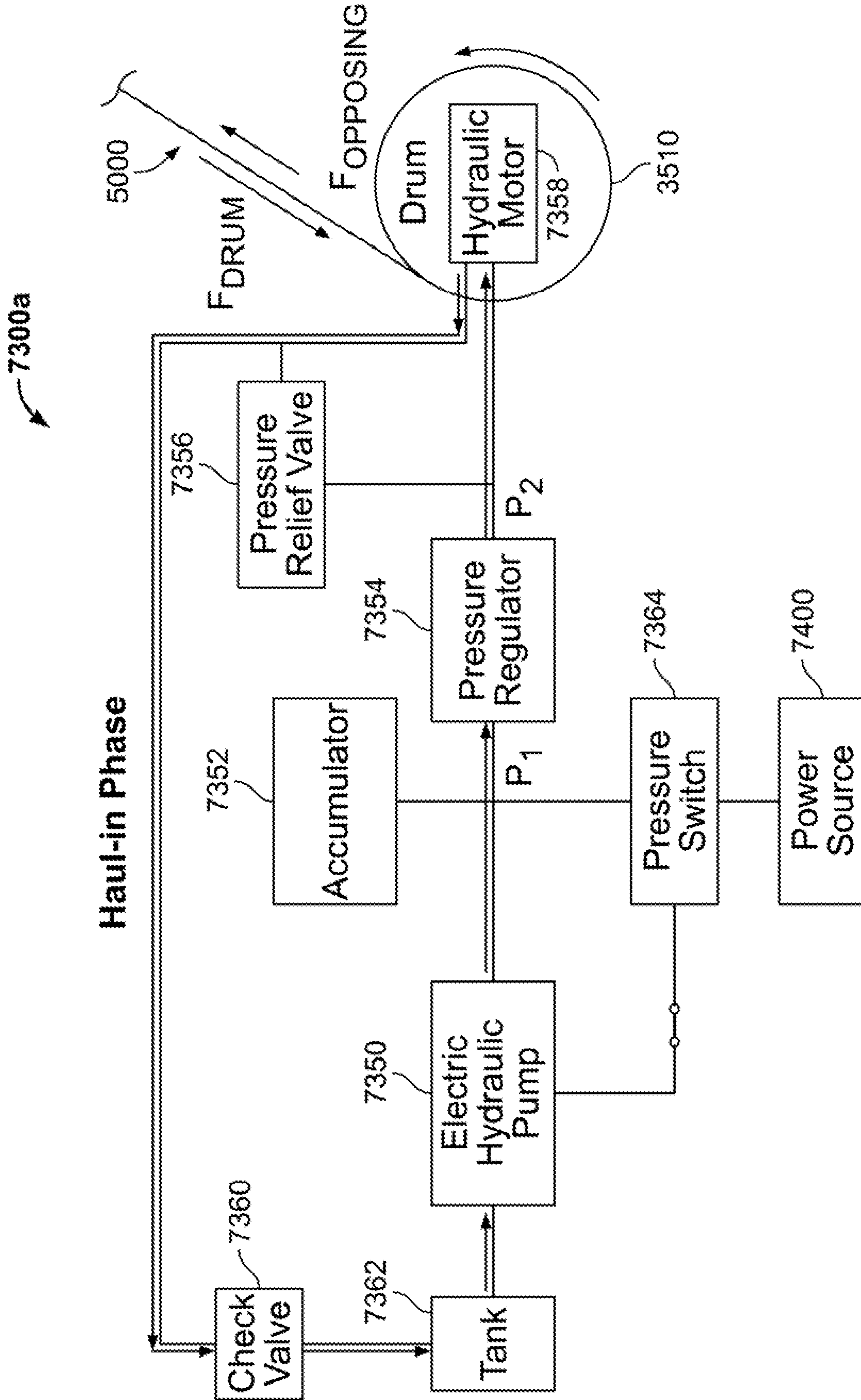


FIG. 13A

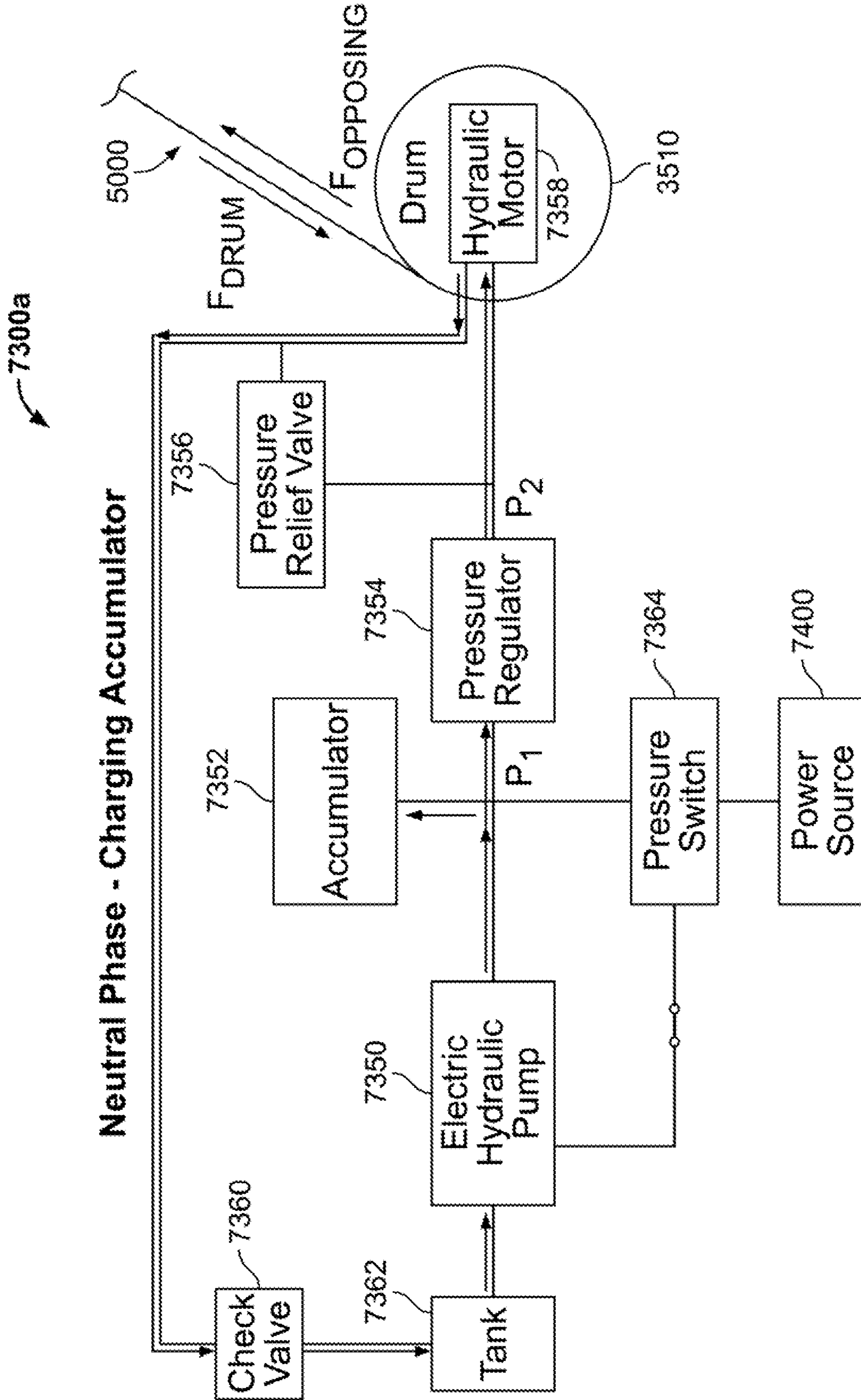


FIG. 13B

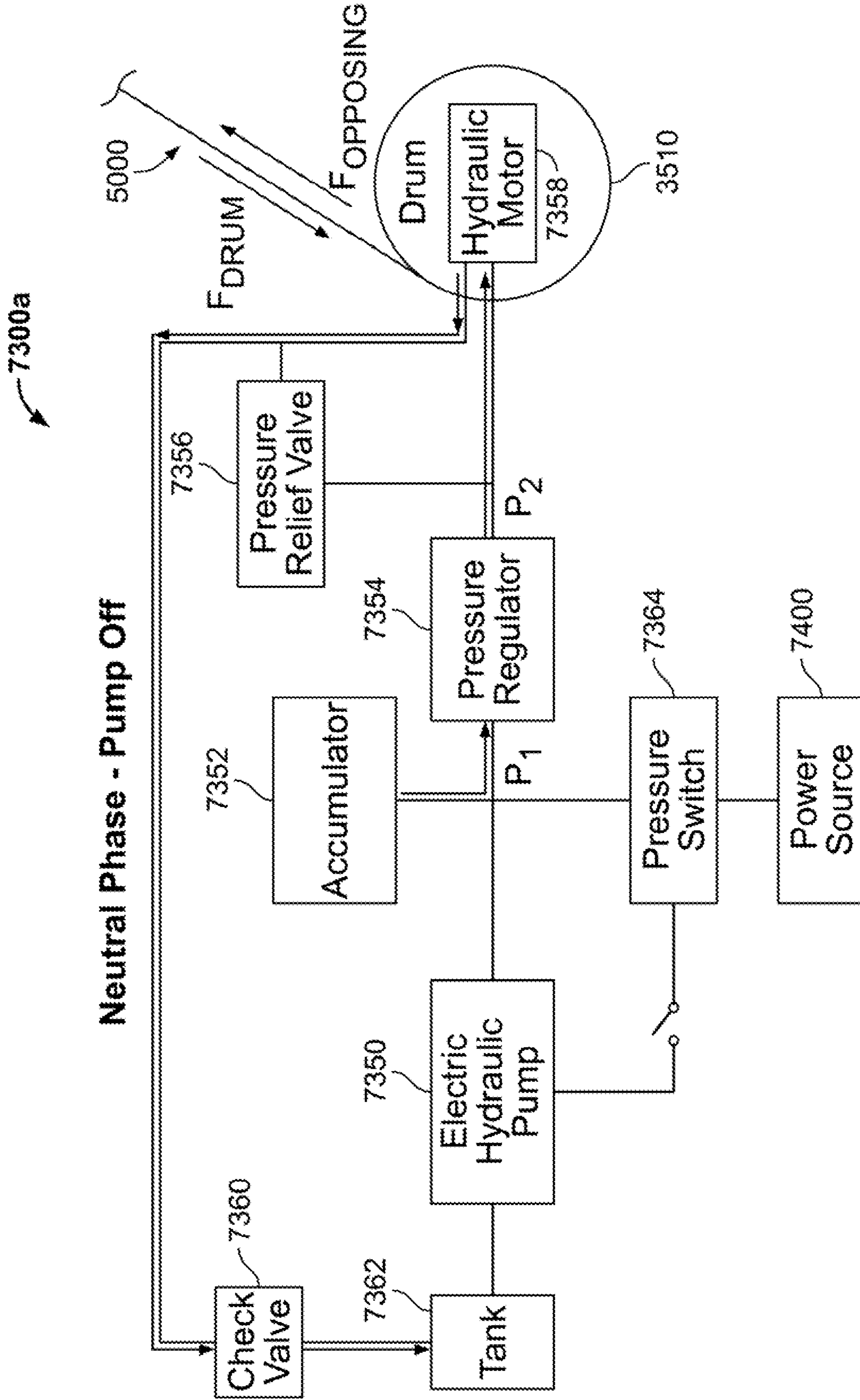


FIG. 13C

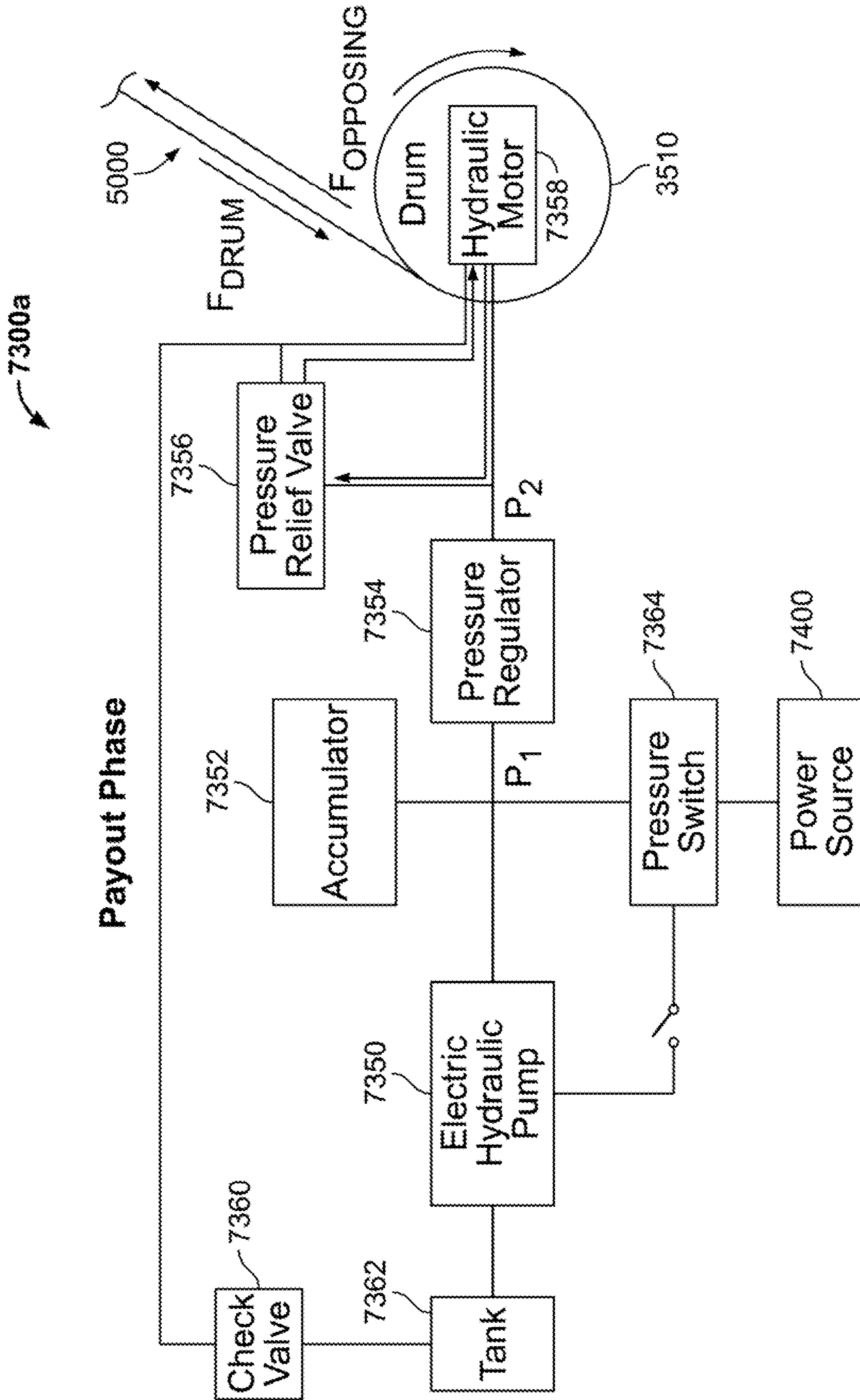


FIG. 13D

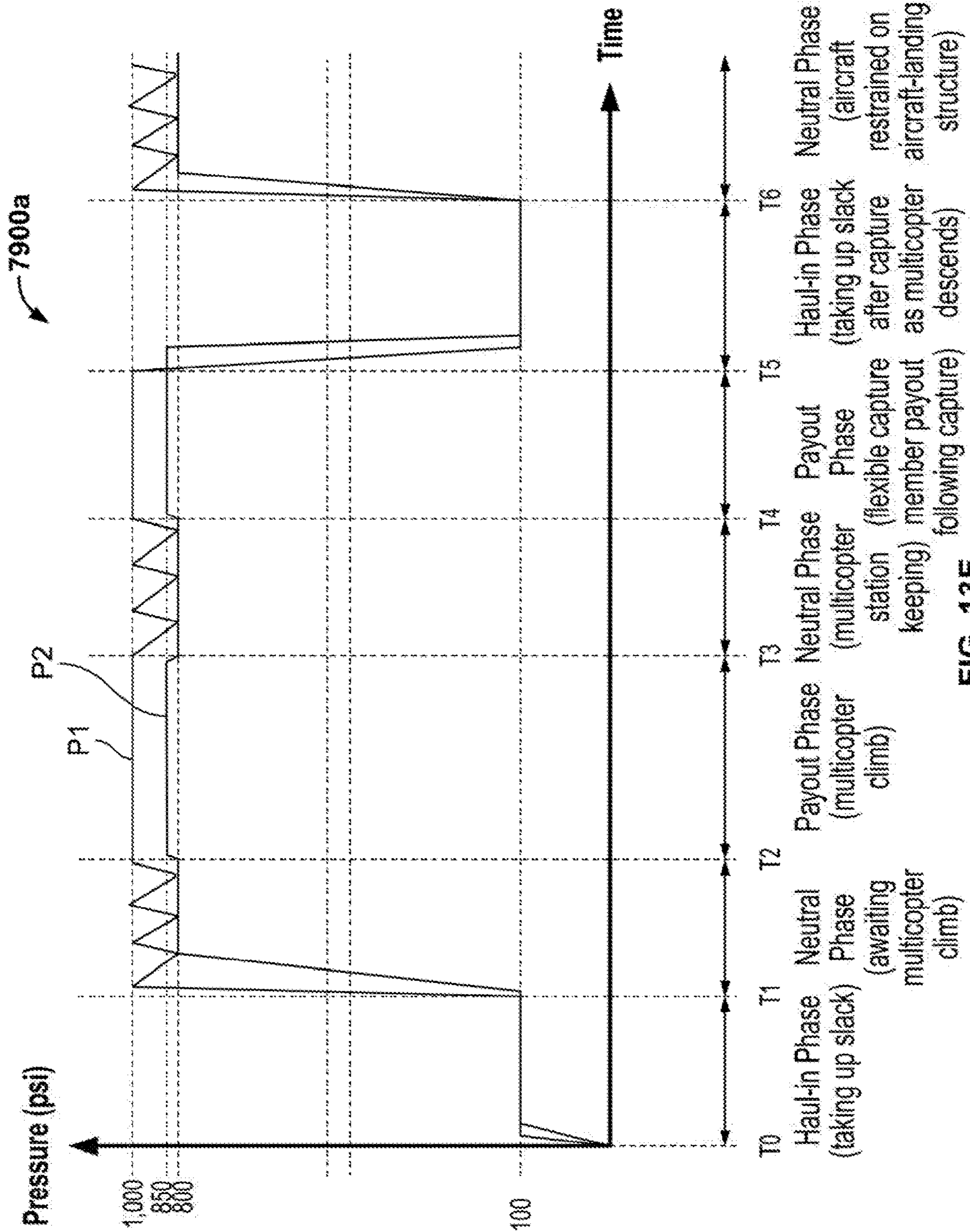


FIG. 13E

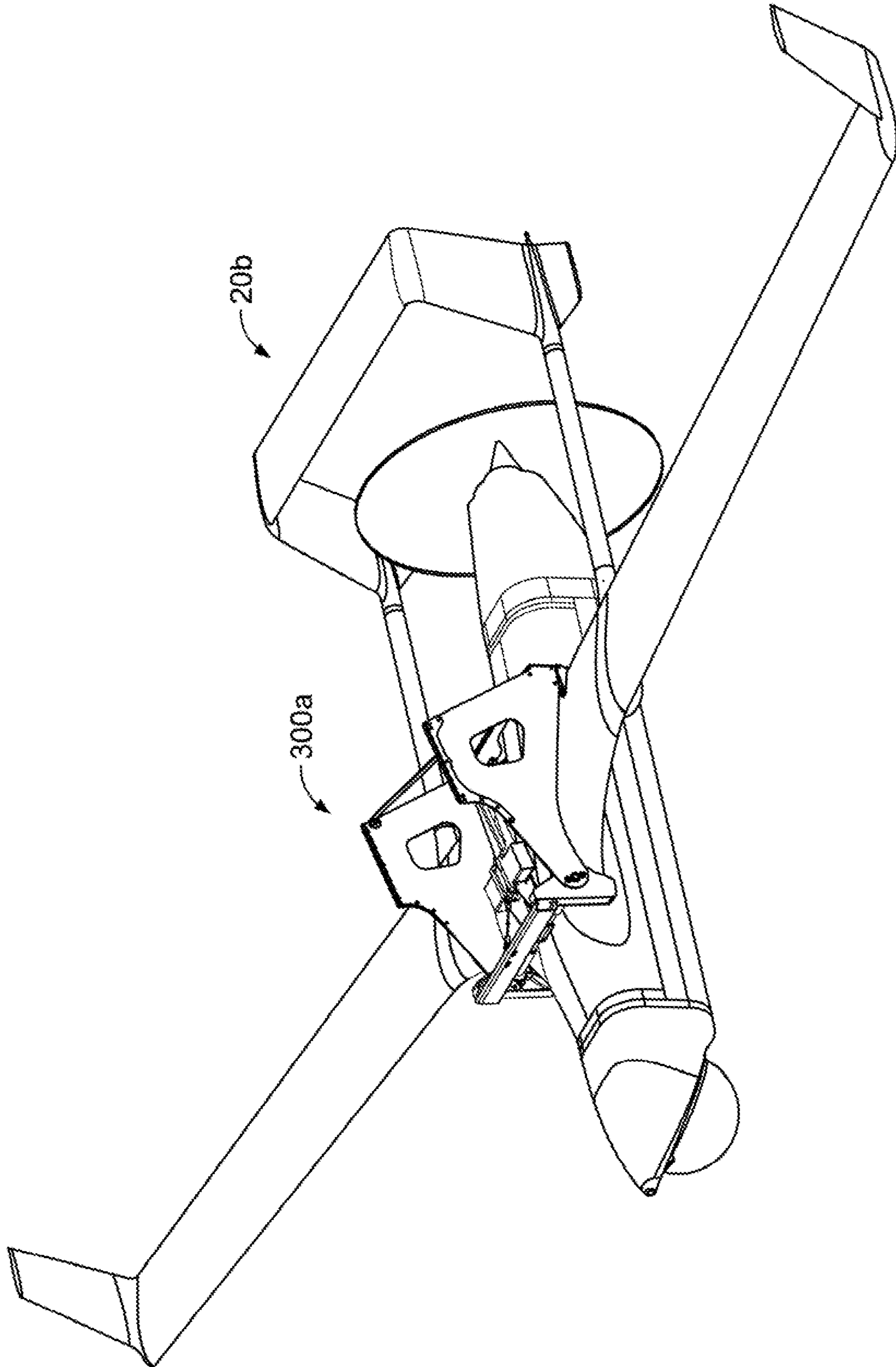


FIG. 14A

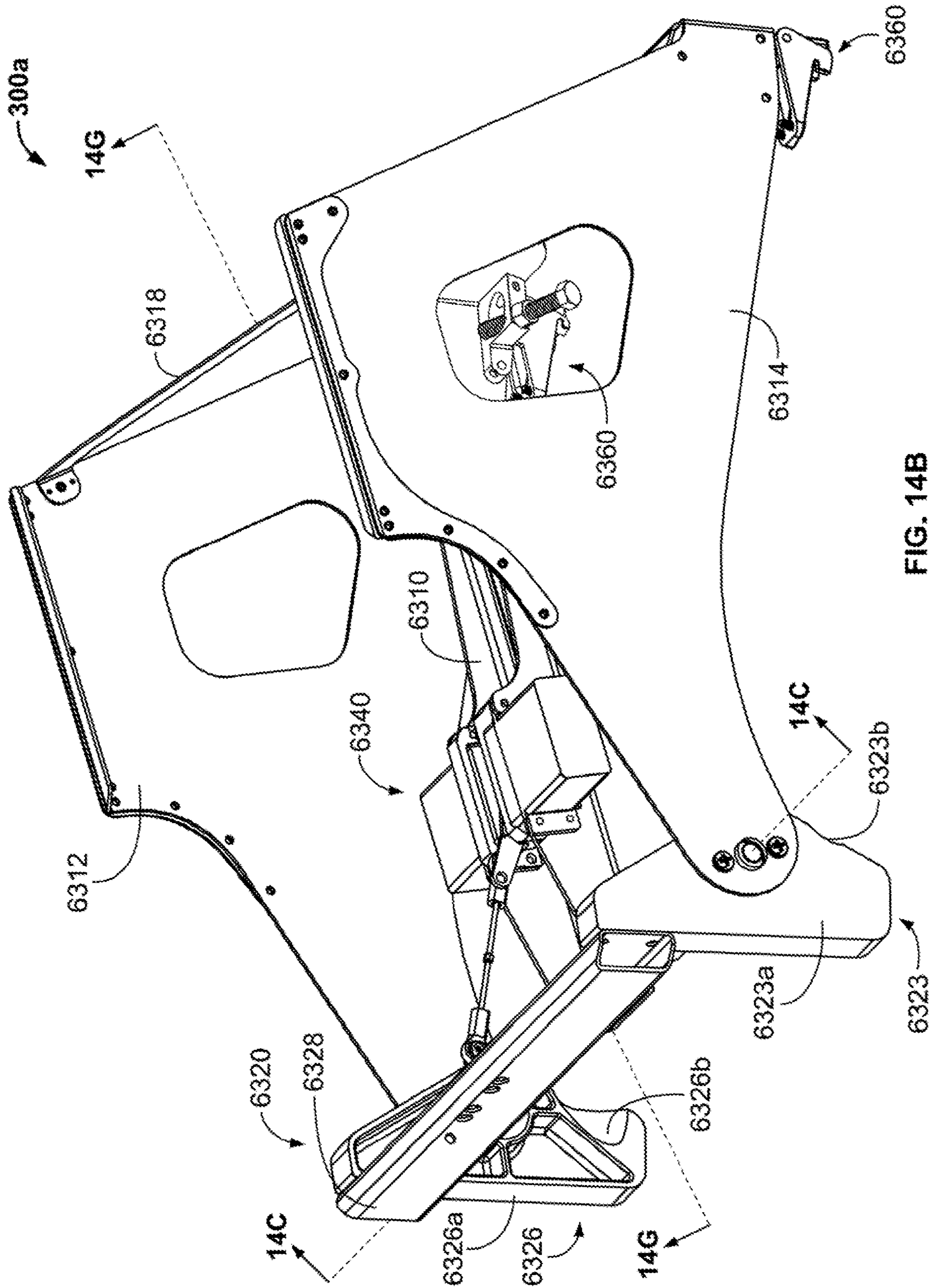


FIG. 14B

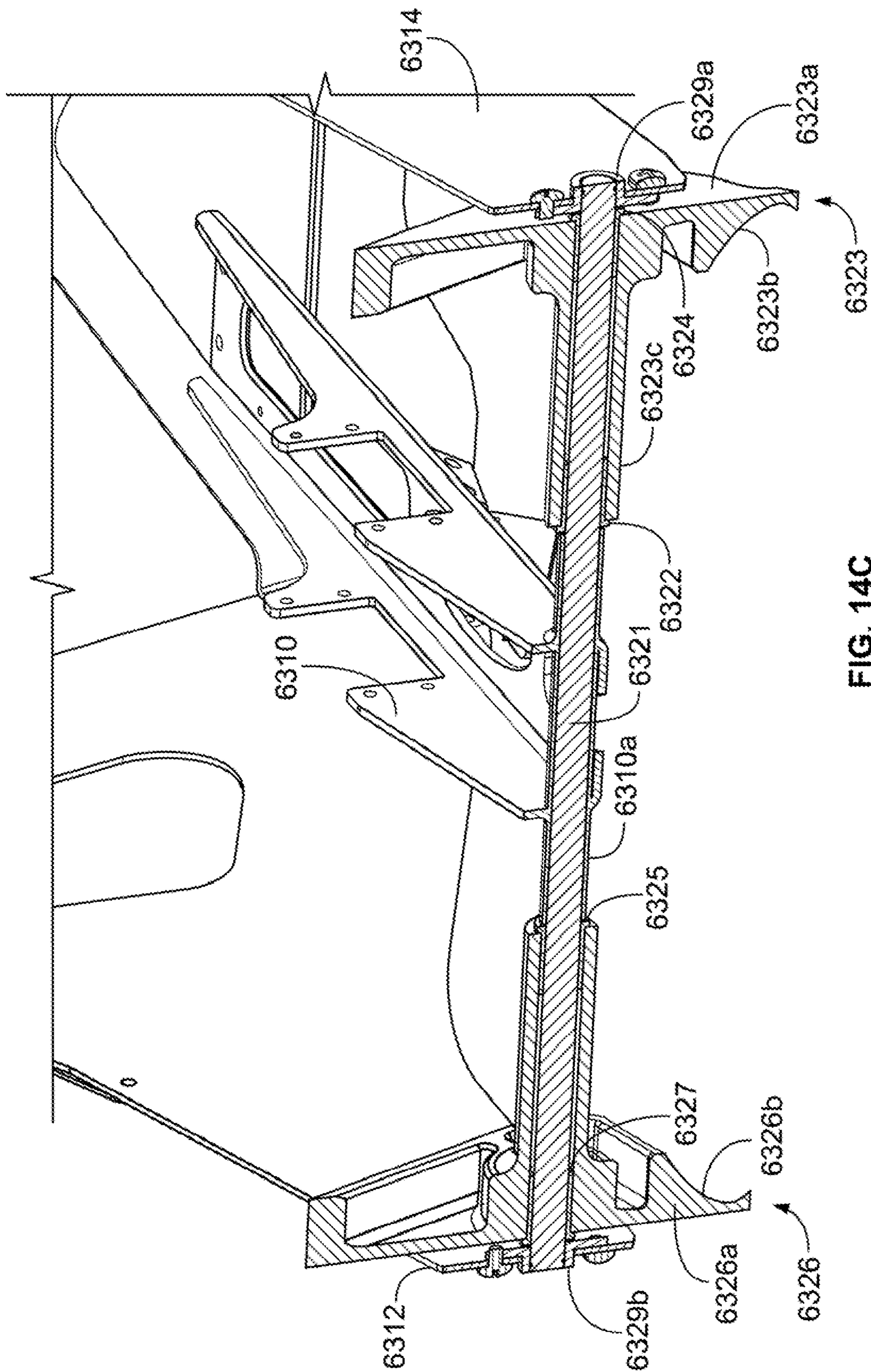


FIG. 14C

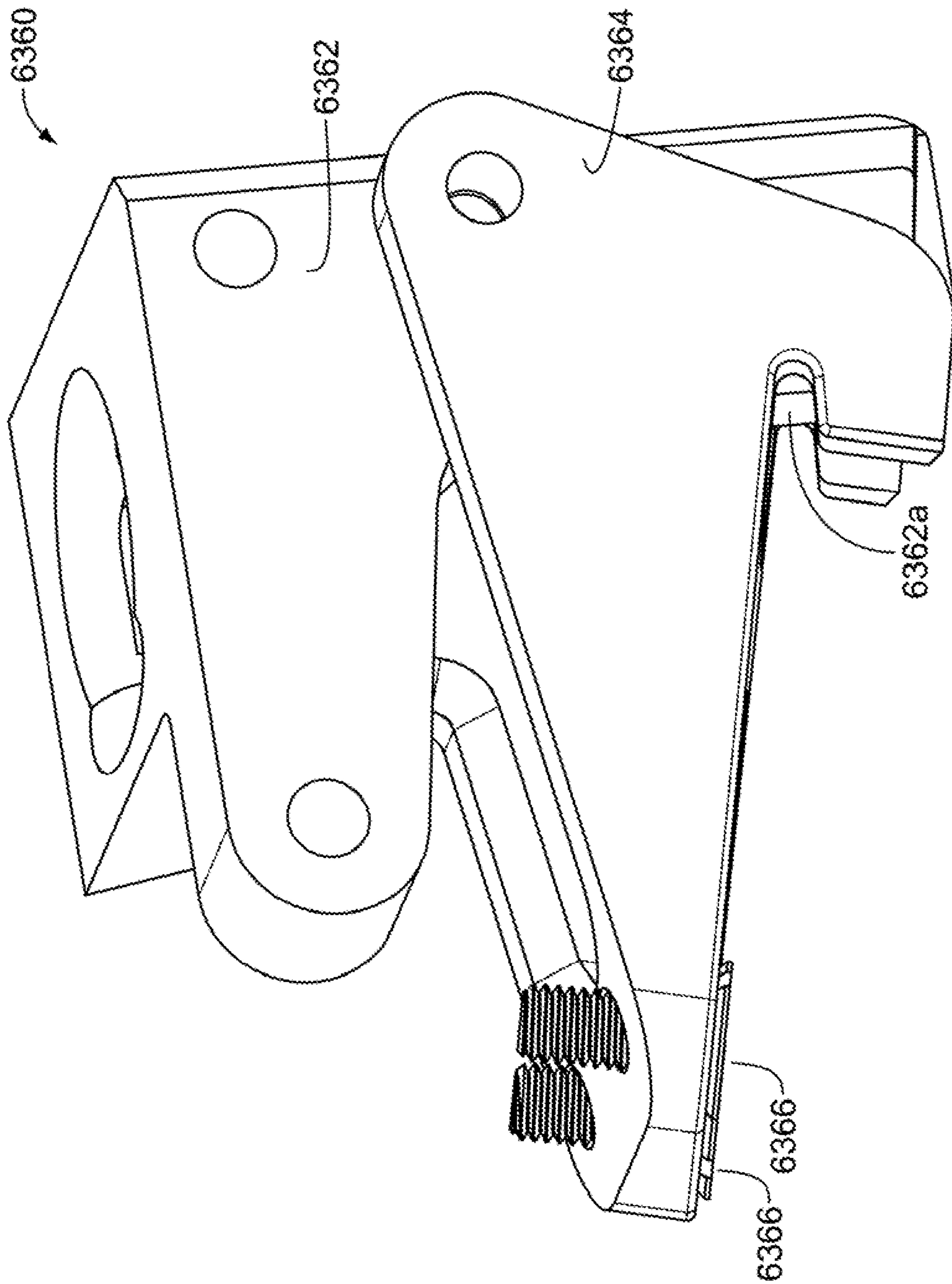


FIG. 14D

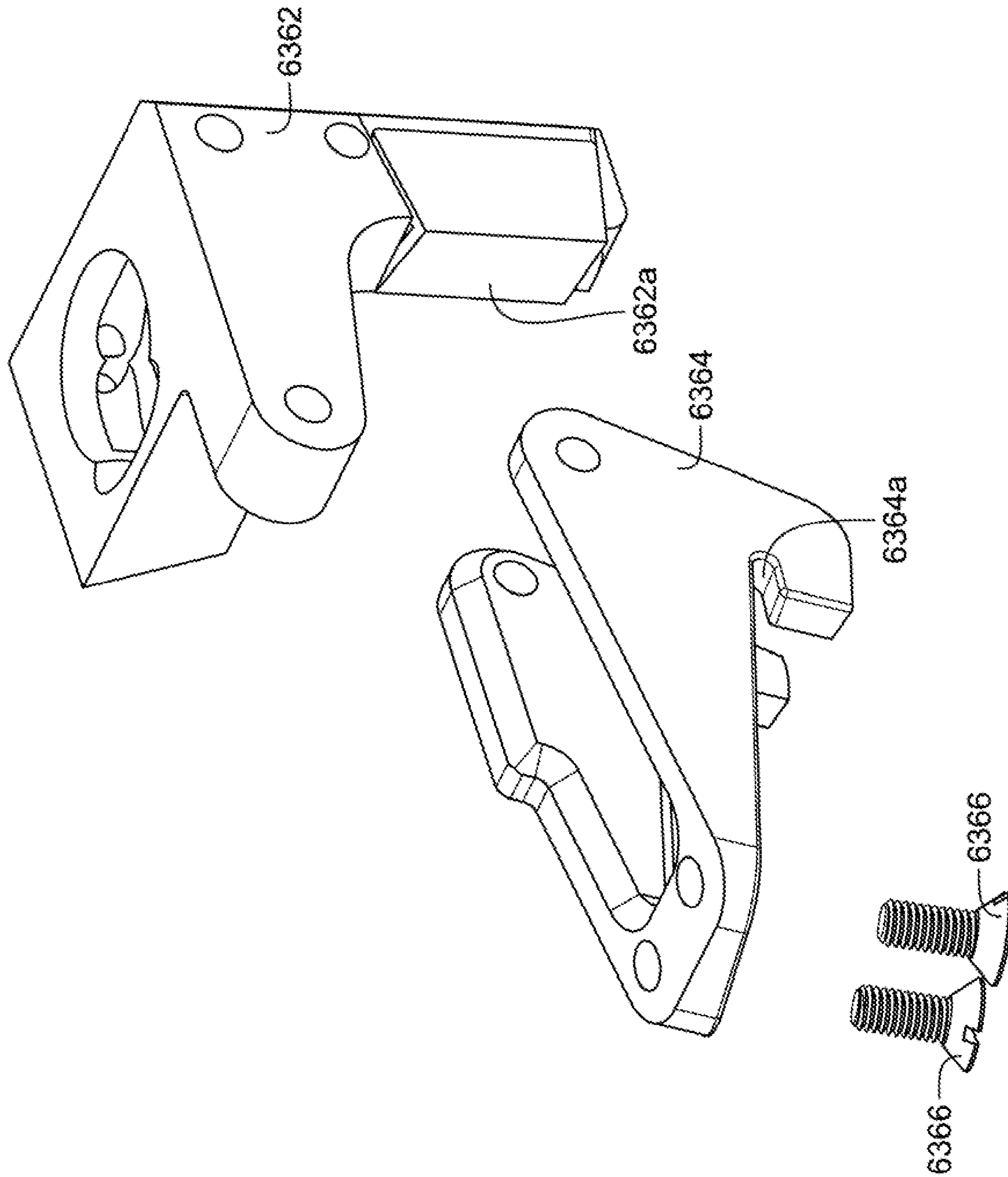


FIG. 14E

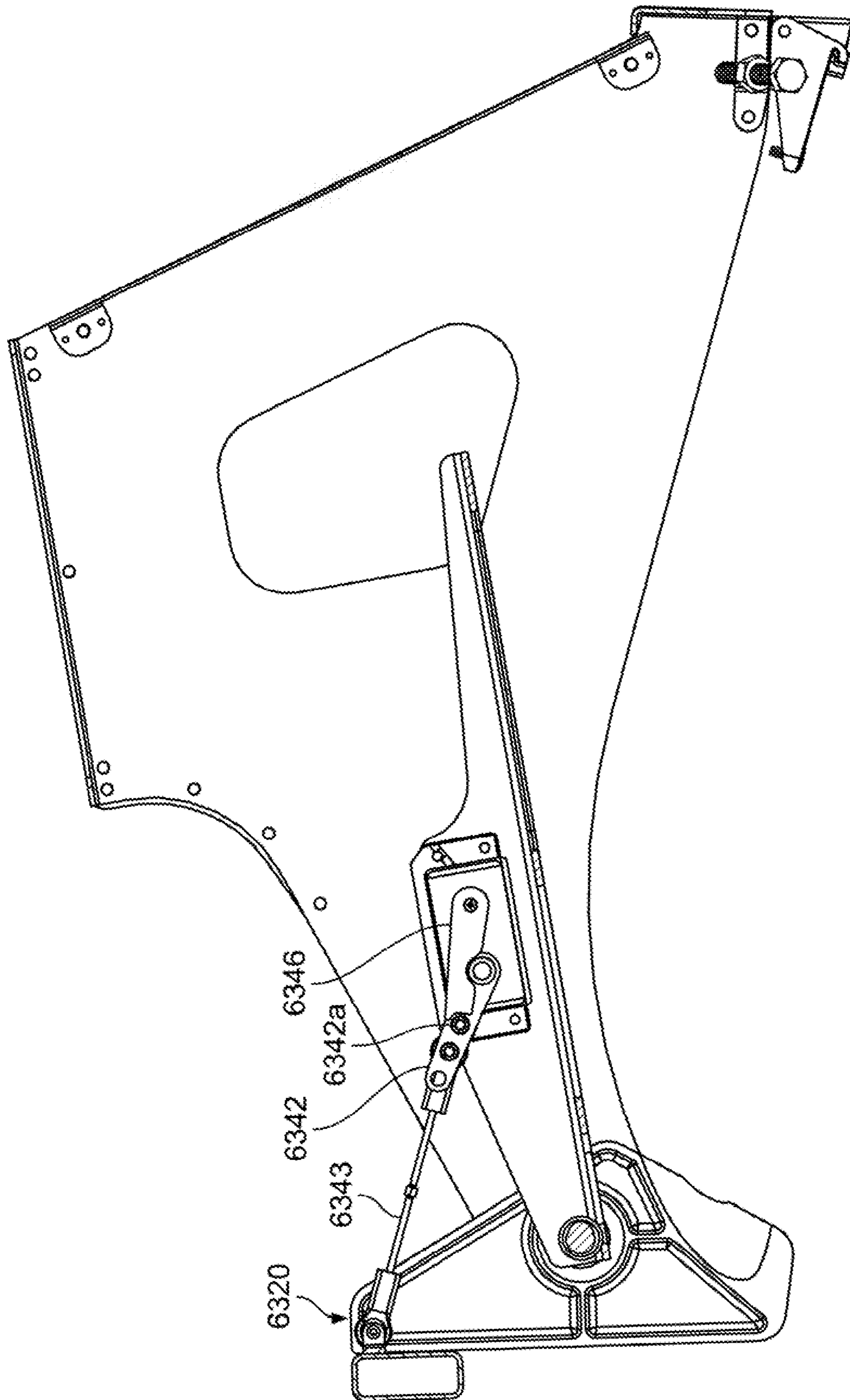


FIG. 14G

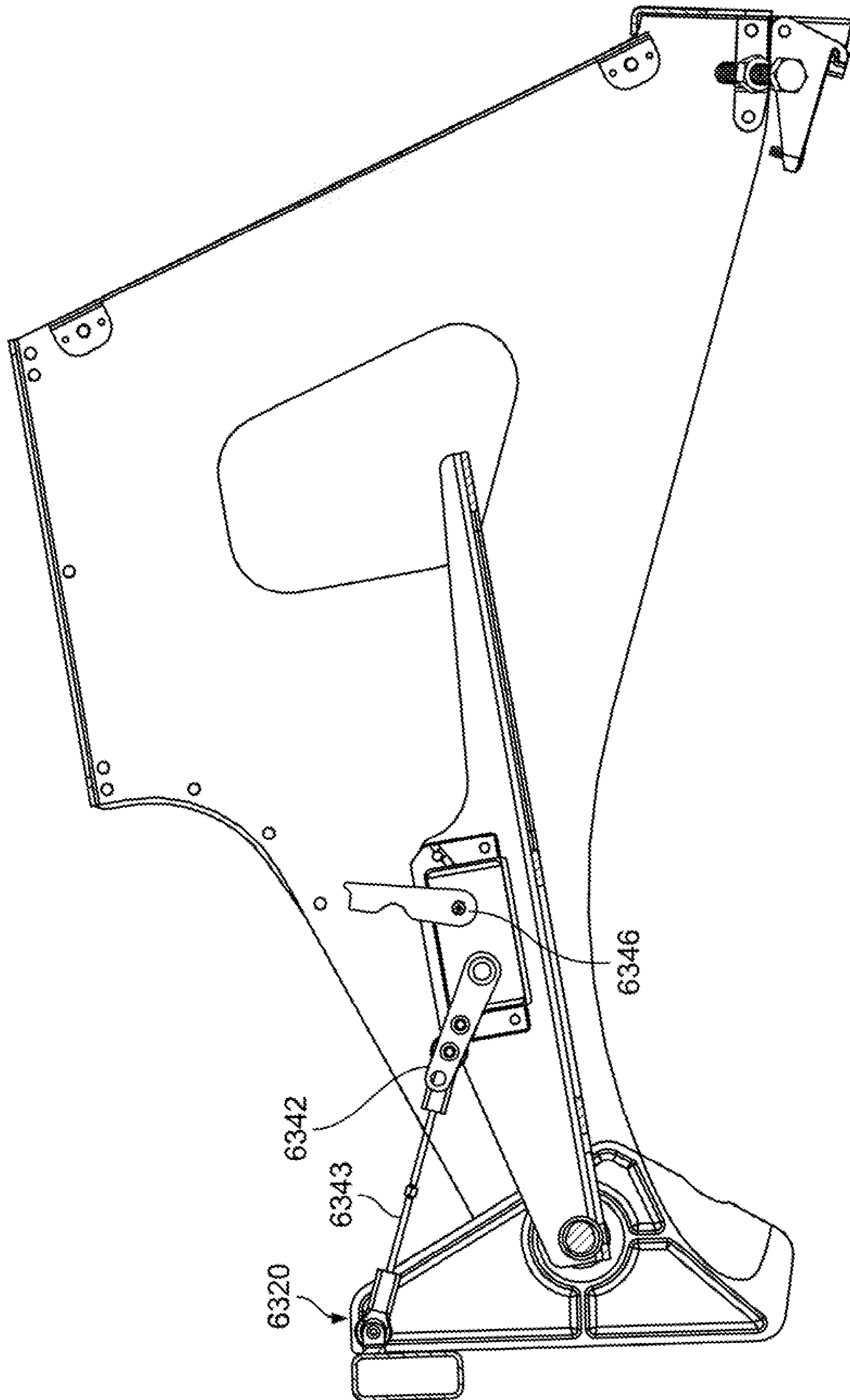


FIG. 14H

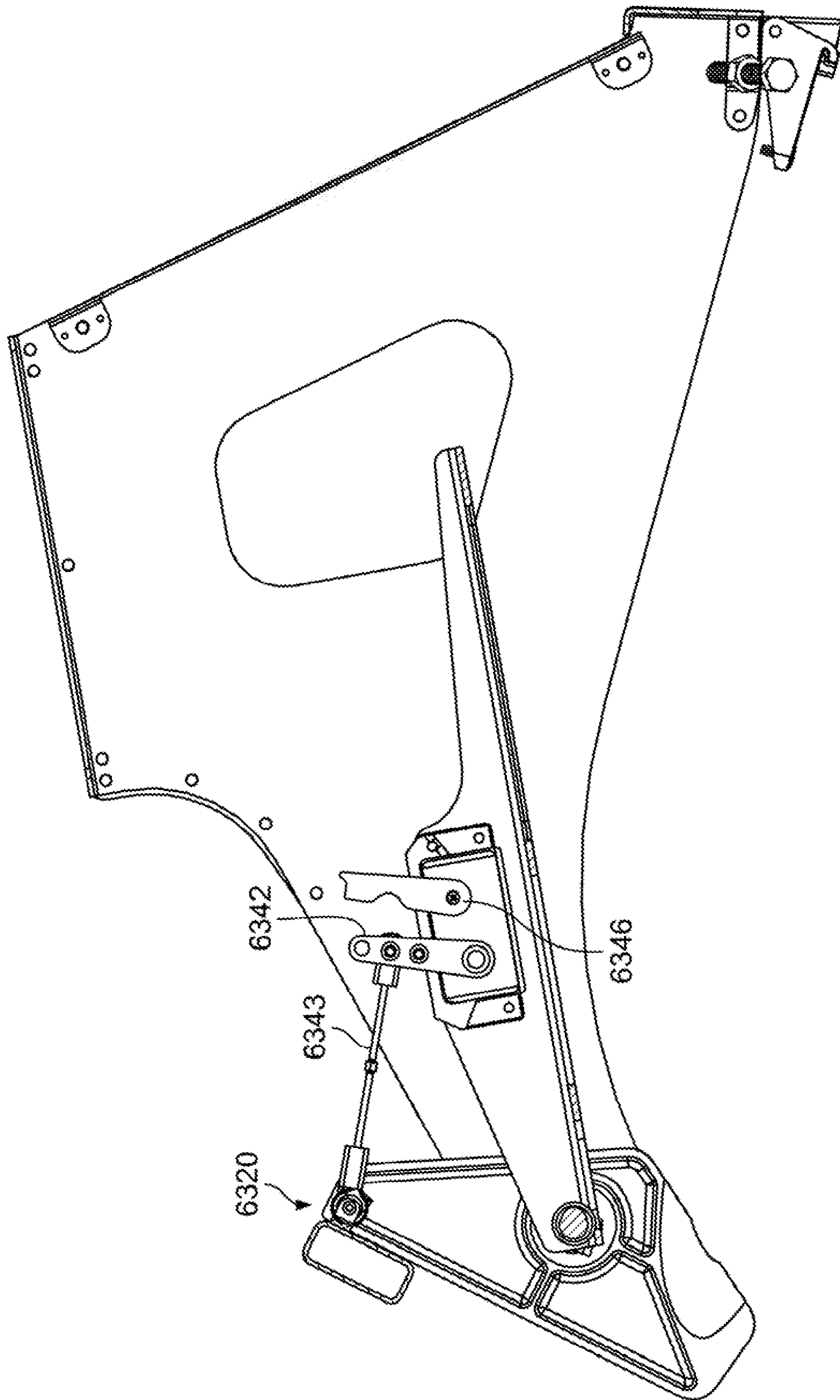


FIG. 14I

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**ROTORCRAFT-ASSISTED SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR LAUNCHING AND
RETRIEVING A FIXED-WING AIRCRAFT
INTO AND FROM FREE FLIGHT**

PRIORITY CLAIM

This patent application claims priority to and the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 62/376,359, which was filed on Aug. 17, 2016, the entire contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND

Aircraft capable of long-distance, efficient cruising flight typically require long runways for take-off and landing. This limits the locations from which the aircraft can take-off and at which the aircraft can land, since many locations don't have sufficient space for a runway. There is a need for new systems and methods that eliminate the need for these aircraft to use long runways to take-off and land.

SUMMARY

Various embodiments of the present disclosure provide a rotorcraft-assisted system and method for launching and retrieving a fixed-wing aircraft into and from free flight (sometimes called the "launch and retrieval system" for brevity).

The launch and retrieval system includes a modular multicopter, a storage and launch system, an anchor system, a flexible capture member, and an aircraft-landing structure. The multicopter is attachable to the fixed-wing aircraft to facilitate launching the fixed-wing aircraft into free, wing-borne flight. The storage and launch system is usable to store the multicopter (when disassembled) and to act as a launch mount for the fixed-wing aircraft by retaining the fixed-wing aircraft in a desired launch orientation. The anchor system is usable with the multicopter, the flexible capture member, and the aircraft-landing structure to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft from free, wing-borne flight.

Generally, to launch the fixed-wing aircraft into free, wing-borne flight, an operator (or operators): (1) removes the disassembled multicopter from a container of the storage and launch system; (2) assembles the multicopter; (3) mounts the fixed-wing aircraft to a launch-assist assembly of the storage and launch system, which retains the fixed-wing aircraft in a desired launch orientation; (4) attaches the multicopter to the fixed-wing aircraft; (5) controls the multicopter to lift the fixed-wing aircraft to a desired altitude and to accelerate to a desired speed; (6) controls the multicopter to release the fixed-wing aircraft into free, wing-borne flight; and (7) controls the multicopter to land.

Generally, to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft from free, wing-borne flight, an operator (or operators): (1) attaches a free end of the flexible capture member to the multicopter such that the flexible capture member extends from a drum of the anchor system through the aircraft-landing structure to the multicopter; (2) inflates the aircraft-landing structure such that it is positioned above the anchor system; (3) controls the multicopter to fly to a designated altitude above the anchor system and to station-keep relative to the anchor system such that the flexible capture member extends therebetween and the anchor system regulates the tension in the flexible capture member; (4) controls the fixed-wing aircraft to contact and capture the flexible capture member; (5) controls the multicopter to descend such that the fixed-wing

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aircraft contacts the aircraft-landing structure and a ground crew can secure the fixed-wing aircraft; and (6) controls the multicopter to land.

Additional features and advantages of the present disclosure are described in, and will be apparent from, the following Detailed Description and the Figures.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

FIG. 1A is a top perspective view of one example embodiment of the multicopter of the present disclosure attached to a fixed-wing aircraft.

FIG. 1B is a top plan view of the multicopter and the fixed-wing aircraft of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1C is a top perspective view of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1D is a bottom perspective view of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1E is a partially exploded top perspective view of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1F is a partially exploded bottom perspective view of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1G is a block diagram showing certain electrically controlled components of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 2A is a top perspective view of the hub module of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 2B is a bottom perspective view of the hub module of FIG. 2A.

FIG. 2C is a partially exploded top perspective view of the hub module of FIG. 2A showing the hub base separated from the saddle.

FIG. 3A is a top perspective view of the hub base of the hub module of FIG. 2A.

FIG. 3B is a bottom perspective view of the hub base of FIG. 3A.

FIG. 3C is a partially exploded top perspective view of the hub base of FIG. 3A.

FIG. 3D is an exploded top perspective view of the supports and associated mounting hardware of the hub base of FIG. 3A.

FIG. 3E is an exploded top perspective view of the isolator plate and associated mounting hardware of the hub base of FIG. 3A.

FIG. 3F is a partial cross-sectional view of one of the isolator plate mounts of the hub base of FIG. 3A taken substantially along line 3F-3F of FIG. 3C.

FIG. 3G is a partially exploded top perspective view of one of the female blind mate assemblies of the hub base of FIG. 3A.

FIG. 3H is a partial cross-sectional view of one of the flexural mounts of the female blind mate assembly of FIG. 3G taken substantially along line 3H-3H of FIG. 3C.

FIG. 4A is a top perspective view of the saddle of the hub module of FIG. 2A.

FIG. 4B is a bottom perspective view of the saddle of FIG. 4A.

FIG. 4C is a partially exploded top perspective view of the saddle of FIG. 4A.

FIGS. 4D and 4E are side elevational views of the saddle of FIG. 4A showing different positions of the saddle.

FIG. 4F is a top perspective view of the cam of the saddle of FIG. 4A.

FIG. 4G is an exploded top perspective view of the aircraft attaching/releasing assembly and the cam of the saddle of FIG. 4A.

FIG. 4H is a partial cross-sectional view of the saddle of FIG. 4A taken substantially along line 4H-4H of FIG. 4C showing the cam in an attached rotational position.

FIG. 4I is a partial cross-sectional view of the saddle of FIG. 4A taken substantially along line 4H-4H of FIG. 4C showing the cam in a release rotational position.

FIG. 5A is a top perspective view of one of the rotor arm modules of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 5B is a bottom perspective view of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A.

FIG. 5C is a top perspective view of the locking assembly of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A.

FIGS. 5D, 5E, and 5F are side elevational views of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A detaching from the hub module of FIG. 2A via the locking assembly of FIG. 5C.

FIG. 5G is an exploded top perspective view of one of the rotor arm assemblies and part of the rotor assembly of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A.

FIG. 5H is a cross-sectional view of the rotor motor assemblies of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A taken substantially along line 5H-5H of FIG. 5A.

FIG. 5I is an exploded top perspective view of one of the rotor motor collars and one of the rotor motor fans of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A.

FIG. 5J is a cross-sectional view of the rotor assembly of the rotor arm module of FIG. 5A taken substantially along line 5J-5J of FIG. 5A.

FIG. 6A is a top perspective view of one of the front landing gear extension modules of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 6B is a top perspective view of one of the rear landing gear extension modules of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 7A is a top perspective view of one of the front landing gear modules of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 7B is a top perspective view of one of the rear landing gear modules of the multicopter of FIG. 1A.

FIG. 8A is a partially exploded top perspective view of the multicopter of FIG. 1A stored in one example embodiment of the storage and launch system of the present disclosure.

FIG. 8B is an exploded top perspective view of the storage and launch system of FIG. 8A, the 13 modules of the multicopter of FIG. 1A, and elements used to store the multicopter.

FIG. 8C is a top perspective view of the launch-assist assembly of the storage and launch system of FIG. 8A in the launch position.

FIG. 8D is a top perspective view of the storage and launch system of FIG. 8A with the fixed-wing aircraft mounted thereto.

FIG. 8E is an exploded top perspective view of the fuselage-retaining assembly of the launch-assist assembly of FIG. 8C.

FIG. 8F is a front elevational view of the fuselage-retaining assembly of FIG. 8E.

FIG. 8G is a back elevational view of the fuselage-retaining assembly of FIG. 8E.

FIG. 8H is a top perspective view of the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device of the present disclosure.

FIG. 8I is a cross-sectional view of the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device of FIG. 8H taken substantially along line 8I-8I of FIG. 8H.

FIG. 8J is a top perspective view of the hub module storage tray of the present disclosure.

FIGS. 9A and 9B are a top perspective views of one example embodiment of the anchor system of the present disclosure.

FIG. 9C is a partially exploded top perspective view of the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B.

FIGS. 9D and 9E are partially exploded top perspective views of the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B with some components removed.

FIG. 9F is a partially exploded top perspective view of the drum assembly and the level wind system of the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B.

FIG. 9G is a cross-sectional top perspective view of the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B taken substantially along line 9G-9G of FIG. 9A.

FIG. 9H is a top perspective view of the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B stored in a storage container with other accessories.

FIG. 10A is a schematic block diagram of a hydraulic system of the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B during a flexible capture member haul-in phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

FIG. 10B is a schematic block diagram of the hydraulic system of FIG. 10A during a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process while the accumulator is charging.

FIG. 10C is a schematic block diagram of the hydraulic system of FIG. 10A during a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process after the accumulator has been charged and the pump is powered off.

FIG. 10D is a schematic block diagram of the hydraulic system of FIG. 10A during a flexible capture member payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

FIG. 11A is a top perspective view of an aircraft-landing structure of the present disclosure.

FIG. 11B is a front elevational view of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A.

FIG. 11C is a top plan view of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A.

FIG. 11D is a bottom plan view of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A.

FIG. 11E is a cross-sectional side elevational view of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A taken substantially along line 11E-11E of FIG. 11C.

FIG. 11F is a cross-sectional side elevational view of an upper portion of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A taken substantially along line 11E-11E of FIG. 11C.

FIG. 11G is a cross-sectional side elevational view of an intermediate portion of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A taken substantially along line 11E-11E of FIG. 11C.

FIG. 11H is a top perspective view of an upper guiding sealing component of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A.

FIG. 11I is a cross-sectional side elevational view of the upper guiding component of FIG. 11H taken substantially along line 11I-11I of FIG. 11H.

FIG. 11J is a top perspective view of the intermediate guiding component of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A.

FIG. 11K is a cross-sectional side elevational view of the intermediate guiding component of FIG. 11J taken substantially along line 11K-11K of FIG. 11J.

FIG. 11L is a top perspective view of the lower guiding and mounting component of the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A.

FIG. 11M is a cross-sectional side elevational view of the lower guiding and mounting component of FIG. 11L taken substantially along line 11M-11M of FIG. 11L.

FIG. 12A is a partial cross-sectional view of the saddle of FIG. 4A showing the cam in an attached rotational position and a hook of the fixed-wing aircraft attached taken substantially along line 10A-10A of FIG. 4C.

FIG. 12B is a partial cross-sectional view of the saddle of FIG. 4A showing the cam halfway between the attached rotational position and the release rotational position and the hook of the fixed-wing aircraft being pushed off of the cam taken substantially along line 10A-10A of FIG. 4C.

FIG. 12C is a partial cross-sectional view of the saddle of FIG. 4A showing the cam in the release rotational position and the hook of the fixed-wing aircraft released from the cam taken substantially along line 10A-10A of FIG. 4C.

FIG. 12D is a diagrammatic view of the multicopter of FIG. 1A, the fixed-wing aircraft of FIG. 1A, a flexible capture member, the aircraft-landing structure of FIG. 11A, and the anchor system of FIGS. 9A and 9B just before the fixed-wing aircraft captures the flexible capture member.

FIG. 12E is a diagrammatic view of the multicopter, the fixed-wing aircraft, the flexible capture member, the aircraft-landing structure, and the anchor system just after the fixed-wing aircraft captures the flexible capture member and as the anchor system is paying out flexible capture member.

FIG. 12F is a diagrammatic view of the multicopter, the fixed-wing aircraft, the flexible capture member, the aircraft-landing structure, and the anchor system after the fixed-wing aircraft has stopped moving and the anchor system has retracted the paid-out portion of the flexible capture member.

FIG. 12G is a diagrammatic view of the multicopter, the fixed-wing aircraft, the flexible capture member, the aircraft-landing structure, and the anchor system after the multicopter has lowered the fixed-wing aircraft onto the aircraft-landing structure.

FIG. 12H is a graph of two pressures during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process employing the anchor system with the hydraulic system of FIGS. 10A-10D.

FIG. 13A is a schematic block diagram of an alternative hydraulic system of an alternative anchor system during a flexible capture member haul-in phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

FIG. 13B is a schematic block diagram of the hydraulic system of FIG. 13A during a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process while the accumulator is charging.

FIG. 13C is a schematic block diagram of the hydraulic system of FIG. 13A during a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process after the accumulator has been charged and the pump is powered off.

FIG. 13D is a schematic block diagram of the hydraulic system of FIG. 13A during a flexible capture member payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

FIG. 13E is a graph of two pressures during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process employing the hydraulic system of FIGS. 13A-13D.

FIG. 14A is a top perspective view of an alternative fixed-wing aircraft attached to an alternative saddle.

FIG. 14B is a top perspective view of the saddle of FIG. 14A.

FIG. 14C is a cross-sectional view of the saddle of FIG. 14A taken substantially along line 14C-14C of FIG. 14B and with certain elements removed.

FIGS. 14D and 14E are, respectively, assembled and exploded top perspective views of a rear engager of the saddle of FIG. 14A.

FIG. 14F is an exploded top perspective view of the attachment/release device of the part of the saddle of FIG. 14A.

FIGS. 14G-14I are cross-sectional side elevational views of the part of the saddle of FIG. 14A showing different configurations of the lock arm and the front engager arm.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

While the features, methods, devices, and systems described herein may be embodied in various forms, there are shown in the drawings, and will hereinafter be described, some exemplary and non-limiting embodiments. Not all of the depicted components described in this disclosure may be required, however, and some implementations may include additional, different, or fewer components from those expressly described in this disclosure. Variations in the arrangement and type of the components; the shapes, sizes, and materials of the components; and the manners of attachment and connections of the components may be made without departing from the spirit or scope of the claims as set forth herein. This specification is intended to be taken as a whole and interpreted in accordance with the principles of the invention as taught herein and understood by one of ordinary skill in the art.

The rotorcraft-assisted fixed-wing aircraft launch and retrieval system (sometimes called the “launch and retrieval system” for brevity) of various embodiments of the present disclosure is usable to launch a fixed-wing aircraft 20a into free, wing-borne flight and to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from free, wing-borne flight. While the fixed-wing aircraft 20a may be any suitable fixed-wing aircraft, the fixed-wing aircraft of the example embodiments described below include: (1) the SCANEAGLE unmanned aerial vehicle 20a (SCANEAGLE is a registered trademark of the Boeing Company); and (2) the INTEGRATOR unmanned aerial vehicle 20b (INTEGRATOR is a registered trademark of Insitu, Inc.).

The launch and retrieval system includes a modular multicopter 10, a storage and launch system 2000, an anchor system 3000, a flexible capture member 5000, and an aircraft-landing structure 8000. The multicopter 10 is attachable to the fixed-wing aircraft 20a to facilitate launching the fixed-wing aircraft 20a into free, wing-borne flight. The storage and launch system 2000 is usable to store the multicopter 10 (when disassembled) and to act as a launch mount for the fixed-wing aircraft 20a by retaining the fixed-wing aircraft 20a in a desired launch orientation. The anchor system 3000 is usable with the multicopter 10, the flexible capture member 5000, and the aircraft-landing structure 8000 to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from free, wing-borne flight.

Generally, to launch the fixed-wing aircraft 20a into free, wing-borne flight, an operator (or operators): (1) removes the disassembled multicopter 10 from a container of the storage and launch system 2000; (2) assembles the multicopter 10; (3) mounts the fixed-wing aircraft 20a to a launch-assist assembly of the storage and launch system 2000, which retains the fixed-wing aircraft 20a in a desired launch orientation; (4) attaches the multicopter 10 to the fixed-wing aircraft 20a; (5) controls the multicopter 10 to lift the fixed-wing aircraft 20a to a desired altitude and to accelerate to a desired speed; (6) controls the multicopter 10 to release the fixed-wing aircraft 20a into free, wing-borne flight; and (7) controls the multicopter 10 to land.

Generally, to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from free, wing-borne flight, an operator (or operators): (1) attaches a free end of the flexible capture member 5000 to the multicopter 10 such that the flexible capture member 5000 extends from a drum of the anchor system 3000

through the aircraft-landing structure **8000** to the multicopter **10**; (2) inflates the aircraft-landing structure **8000** such that it is positioned above the anchor system **3000**; (3) controls the multicopter **10** to fly to a designated altitude above the anchor system **3000** and to station-keep relative to the anchor system **3000** such that the flexible capture member **5000** extends therebetween and the anchor system **3000** regulates the tension in the flexible capture member **5000**; (4) controls the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** to contact and capture the flexible capture member **5000**; (5) controls the multicopter **10** to descend such that the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** contacts the aircraft-landing structure **8000** and a ground crew can secure the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**; and (6) controls the multicopter **10** to land.

While the multicopter **10** includes eight rotors in the example embodiments described below, the launch and retrieval system may include any suitable rotorcraft including any suitable quantity of rotors, such as one rotor, two rotors, or four rotors.

1. Multicopter

FIGS. **1A**, **1B**, **1C**, **1D**, **1E**, **1F**, and **1G** show the multicopter **10**. The multicopter **10** is modular in that it is assembled from (and can be disassembled into) a plurality of different modules or subassemblies. The multicopter is removably attachable to: (1) the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** to facilitate launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** into free, wing-borne flight, and (2) to the flexible capture member **5000** to facilitate retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from free, wing-borne flight.

As best shown in FIGS. **1E** and **1F**, the multicopter **10** includes the following 13 modules or subassemblies: a hub module **100**; first, second, third, and fourth rotor arm modules **400a**, **400b**, **400c**, and **400d**; first and second front landing gear extension modules **500a** and **500b**; first and second rear landing gear extension modules **500c** and **500d**; first and second front landing gear modules **600a** and **600b**; and first and second rear landing gear modules **600c** and **600d**.

As described in detail below, to assemble the multicopter **10** from these 13 modules or subassemblies, after removing the 13 modules from the container of the storage and launch system **2000**, an operator: (1) attaches the first, second, third, and fourth rotor arm modules **400a**, **400b**, **400c**, and **400d** to the hub module **100**; (2) attaches the first and second front landing gear extension modules **500a** and **500b** to the first and second rotor arm modules **400a** and **400b**, respectively; (3) attaches the first and second rear landing gear extension modules **500c** and **500d** to the third and fourth rotor arm modules **400c** and **400d**, respectively; (4) attaches the first and second front landing gear module **600a** and **600b** to the first and second front landing gear extension modules **500a** and **500b**, respectively; and (5) attaches the first and second rear landing gear module **600c** and **600d** to the first and second rear landing gear extension modules **500c** and **500d**, respectively.

The modularity of this multicopter is beneficial compared to non-modular or unitary multicopter construction. First, the modularity of this multicopter enables an operator to quickly and easily disassemble this relatively large multicopter into 13 smaller modules or subassemblies. The operator can compactly store these modules or subassemblies into a single container, which makes the disassembled multicopter easy to store and transport compared to the assembled multicopter. Second, if a part of this multicopter breaks, its modularity enables the operator to quickly and easily replace the module(s) or subassembly(ies) including the broken part

with a properly functioning replacement module(s) or subassembly(ies) rather than waste time repairing the broken component(s).

FIG. **1G** is a block diagram of certain electrically controlled components of the multicopter **10**. In this embodiment, although not shown in FIG. **1G**, four (or any suitable quantity of) lithium-ion batteries (or any other suitable power source(s)) power these components (as described below). For a given component, the power source may be directly electrically connected to that component to power that component or indirectly electrically connected to that component (e.g., via another component) to power that component.

The hub module **100** includes a hub base **200** and a saddle **300**. The hub base **200** includes: (1) a controller **272**; (2) a communications interface **274**; (3) an inertial measurement unit (IMU) **277**; (4) a barometer **278** (or other suitable pressure sensor); (5) a GPS receiver **285**; and (6) eight electronic speed controllers (ESCs) **265a**, **265b**, **265c**, **265d**, **265e**, **265f**, **265g**, and **265h**. The saddle **300** includes: (1) a cam servo motor **381**; and (2) a lock servo motor **391**. This is merely one example configuration, and these components may be located on any suitable part of the multicopter in other embodiments. The first rotor arm module **400a** includes an upper rotor motor **465a** and a lower rotor motor **465b**. The second rotor arm module **400b** includes an upper rotor motor **465c** and a lower rotor motor **465d**. The third rotor arm module **400c** includes an upper rotor motor **465e** and a lower rotor motor **465f**. The fourth rotor arm module **400d** includes an upper rotor motor **465g** and a lower rotor motor **465h**.

The controller **272** is electrically and communicatively connected to the communications interface **274**, the IMU **277**, the barometer **278**, the GPS receiver **285**, the ESCs **265a** to **265h**, the cam servo motor **381**, and the lock servo motor **391**.

The controller **272** includes a processor **272a** and a memory **272b**. The processor **272a** is configured to execute program code or instructions stored in the memory **272b** to control operation of the multicopter **10**, as described herein. The processor **272a** may be one or more of: (1) a general-purpose processor; (2) a content-addressable memory; (3) a digital-signal processor; (4) an application-specific integrated circuit; (5) a field-programmable gate array; (6) any suitable programmable logic device, discrete gate, or transistor logic; (7) discrete hardware components; and (8) any other suitable processing device.

The memory **272b** is configured to store, maintain, and provide data as needed to support the functionality of the multicopter **10**. For instance, in various embodiments, the memory **272b** stores program code or instructions executable by the processor **272a** to control the multicopter **10**. The memory **272b** may be any suitable data storage device, such as one or more of: (1) volatile memory (e.g., RAM, which can include non-volatile RAM, magnetic RAM, ferroelectric RAM, and any other suitable forms); (2) non-volatile memory (e.g., disk memory, FLASH memory, EPROMs, EEPROMs, memristor-based non-volatile solid-state memory, etc.); (3) unalterable memory (e.g., EPROMs); and (4) read-only memory.

The communications interface **274** is a suitable wireless communication interface, such as a transceiver like an MM2 900 MHz Embedded Radio by Freewave Technologies, configured to establish and facilitate communication between the controller **272** and: (1) a computing device (such as a laptop computer, a tablet computer, or a mobile phone, not shown); and (2) an R/C controller (not shown)

that the operator of the multicopter **10** controls. In operation, once the communications interface **274** establishes communication with the computing device, the controller **272** can send data (via the communications interface **274**) associated with the operation of the multicopter **10** (such as the operational status of the multicopter **10**, GPS coordinates of the multicopter **10**, rotor motor status, IMU or other sensor measurements, altitude, GPS reception health, magnetometer health, attitude, and the like) to the computing device. Once the communications interface **274** establishes communication with the R/C controller, the controller **272** can receive signals (via the communications interface **274**) from the R/C controller. More specifically, upon receipt of these signals from the R/C controller, the communications interface **274** converts these signals into a format readable by the controller **272** and sends the converted signals to the controller **272** for processing.

The above-described communication may be bidirectional or unidirectional. In some embodiments, the communications interface **274** enables the controller **272** to send data to the computing device but not receive data from the computing device. In other embodiments, the communications interface **274** enables the controller **272** to send data to the computing device and to receive data from the computing device. In some embodiments, the communications interface **274** enables the controller **272** to receive signals from the R/C controller but not send signals to the R/C controller. In other embodiments, the communications interface **274** enables the controller **272** to receive signals from the R/C controller and send signals to the R/C controller.

In certain embodiments, the communications interface **274** includes separate components for communicating with the computing device (such as a telemetry link) and the R/C controller (such as an R/C receiver).

The IMU **277** includes: (1) multiple accelerometers **277a** configured to sense the linear acceleration of the multicopter **10** with respect to three orthogonal reference axes (e.g., standard orthogonal x-, y, and z-axes); (2) multiple gyroscopes **277b** configured to sense the angular rotation of the multicopter **10** with respect to the pitch, yaw, and roll axes of the multicopter **10**; and (3) a magnetometer **277c** configured to enable the controller **272** to determine the heading of the multicopter **10** (i.e., the direction in which the multicopter **10** is pointed relative to Earth). More specifically, the magnetometer **277c** is configured to sense the Earth's magnetic field and transmit a signal representing the direction of the Earth's magnetic North to the controller **272**. The controller **272** is configured to use the GPS coordinates of the multicopter **10** and a global map of declination angle (the angle between the Earth's true North and the Earth's magnetic North) to determine a required correction angle. The controller **272** is configured to apply the required correction angle to the direction of the Earth's magnetic North to obtain the direction of the Earth's true North. The controller **272** is configured to use this information to determine the heading of the multicopter **10**. In other embodiments, a pair of GPS receivers are used instead of the magnetometer to maintain more accurate heading. This practice is especially useful when the multicopter is operating in close proximity to large iron objects—such as ship hulls—or when the difference between the Earth's magnetic North and true North is large, such as near the Earth's poles.

The accelerometers **277a**, the gyroscopes **277b**, and the magnetometer **277c** continuously or periodically obtain these sensor readings and continuously or periodically transmit corresponding signals to the controller **272**, which uses

these sensor readings in a variety of different ways described herein. This is merely one example IMU, and the IMU may include any suitable sensors.

The barometer **278** is configured to sense the atmospheric pressure and to transmit a signal representing the sensed atmospheric pressure to the controller **272**. The controller **272** is configured to use the sensed atmospheric pressure to determine: (1) the height of the multicopter **10** above sea level; and (2) the height of the multicopter **10** above the ground or any other suitable reference location. For instance, to determine the height of the multicopter **10** above the ground, the controller **272** uses a reference atmospheric pressure sensed by the barometer **278** while the multicopter **10** is on the ground just before takeoff to determine the height of the ground above sea level. Once the multicopter **10** is airborne, at any given point in time the controller **272** is configured to determine the height of the multicopter **10** above the ground by: (1) using the atmospheric pressure sensed by the barometer **278** to determine the height of the multicopter **10** above sea level; and (2) determining the difference between the height of the multicopter **10** above sea level and the height of the ground above sea level. This is merely one example way of determining the height of the multicopter above a reference point. Any other suitable method may be employed.

The GPS receiver **285** is communicatively connectable with (such as via a suitable wireless protocol) GPS satellites (not shown), as is known in the art. The GPS receiver **285** is configured to receive signals from one or more of the GPS satellites, to determine the multicopter's location using those signals, and to transmit signals representing the multicopter's location to the controller **272**.

The ESC **265a** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the upper rotor motor **465a** of the first rotor arm module **400a**. The ESC **265b** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the lower rotor motor **465b** of the first rotor arm module **400a**. The ESC **265c** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the upper rotor motor **465c** of the second rotor arm module **400b**. The ESC **265d** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the lower rotor motor **465d** of the second rotor arm module **400b**. The ESC **265e** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the upper rotor motor **465e** of the third rotor arm module **400c**. The ESC **265f** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the lower rotor motor **465f** of the third rotor arm module **400c**. The ESC **265g** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the upper rotor motor **465g** of the fourth rotor arm module **400d**. The ESC **265h** is electrically connected to and, along with the controller **272**, controls the operation of the lower rotor motor **465h** of the fourth rotor arm module **400d**.

The controller **272** is configured to send rotor motor control signals to the ESCs **265a** to **265h** to control operation of the rotor motors **465a** to **465h** in accordance with received control signals and/or control signals the controller **272** generates via any of the software subroutines disclosed herein.

1.1 Hub Module

FIGS. 2A, 2B, and 2C show the hub module **100**. The hub module **100**: (1) serves as the attachment point for the rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d**; (2) is the portion of the multicopter **10** to which the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is attached for launch; (3) is the portion of the multicopter **10** to which the

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flexible capture member **5000** is attached for retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**; (4) includes the power source for the multicopter **10**; and (5) includes certain components used to control operation of the multicopter **10**.

As best shown in FIG. **2C**, the hub module **100** includes a hub base **200** and a saddle **300**. The saddle **300** is attached to the underside of the hub base **200** via two brackets **120a** and **120b** and four struts **110a**, **110b**, **110c**, and **110d**. Each strut **110** is attached at one end to the hub base **200** and at the other end to the saddle **300**. This is merely one example of how the saddle can be attached to the hub base, and in other embodiments the saddle may be attached to the hub base in any suitable manner. For instance, in another embodiment, rather than being attached to the hub base, each strut is attached to a different rotor arm module, such as to one of the rotor motor assemblies of the rotor arm modules.

1.1.1 Hub Base

FIGS. **3A**, **3B**, **3C**, **3D**, **3E**, **3F**, **3G**, and **3H** show the hub base **200** or components thereof. The hub base **200** is the portion of the hub module **100** that: (1) serves as the attachment point for the rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d**; (2) includes the power source for the multicopter **10**; and (3) includes certain components used to control operation of the multicopter **10**.

As best shown in FIGS. **3C** and **3D**, the hub base **200** includes two hollow elongated rectangular supports **210a** and **210b**. The hollow supports **210a** and **210b** interlock with one another near their centers such that the hollow supports **210a** and **210b** are oriented transversely (such as generally perpendicularly) to one another and generally form a cross shape when viewed from above or below. Reinforcing plugs **212** are disposed within the hollow supports **210a** and **210b** such that fastener receiving openings (not labeled) of the reinforcing plugs **212** vertically align with fastener receiving openings (not labeled) of the hollow supports **210a** and **210b**. Upper and lower braces **220a** and **220b** sandwich the hollow supports **210a** and **210b**. A fastener **222** threaded through the upper brace **220a**, the hollow support **210a**, the reinforcing plug **212**, the hollow support **210b**, and the lower brace **220b** holds the upper and lower braces **220a** and **220b** and the hollow supports **210a** and **210b** together. This ensures the hollow supports **210a** and **210b** remain interlocked and ensures their orientation with respect to one another does not substantially change.

The hollow supports **210a** and **210b** are attached to a hub base plate **202** via suitable fasteners (not labeled) threaded through the hollow supports **210a** and **210b** and the reinforcing plugs **212** disposed within the hollow supports **210a** and **210b**. As best shown in FIG. **2B**, two stabilizers **290a** and **290b** are attached to and extend downward from either hollow support **210a** and **210b**. The free ends of the stabilizers **290a** and **290b** terminate in feet configured to contact the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** to help prevent the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from rotating around its roll axis relative to the multicopter **10**. The feet are adjustable in length (e.g., are threaded such that they can be shortened by threading further into the stabilizers or lengthened by unthreading further out of the stabilizers).

As best shown in FIG. **3C**, first and third isolator plate mounts **240a** and **240c** are attached (such as via lashing) to the hollow support **210a** and second and fourth isolator plate mounts **240b** and **240d** are attached (such as via lashing) to the hollow support **210b** radially inward of the ends of the hollow supports **210a** and **210b**. Each isolator plate mount **240** includes a first isolator plate mounting post **242** defining a threaded fastener receiving opening at least partially

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therethrough and a second isolator plate mounting post **244** defining a threaded fastener receiving opening at least partially therethrough.

An isolator plate **250** is slidably mounted to the isolator plate mounts **240a**, **240b**, **240c**, and **240d**. FIGS. **3E** and **3F** show how the isolator plate **250** is mounted to the isolator plate mount **240b**. For simplicity and brevity, illustrations of how the isolator plate **250** is mounted to the remaining three isolator plate mounts **240a**, **240c**, and **240d** in a similar manner are not provided.

The isolator plate **250** defines first and second mounting openings **250a** and **250b** therethrough. An elastomeric grommet **252** is installed in the first mounting opening **250a** of the isolator plate **250**. The grommet **252** defines a first isolator plate mounting post receiving channel **252a** therethrough, and the first isolator plate mounting post **242b** is slidably received in the first isolator plate mounting post receiving channel **252a**. A fastener **254** having a stop washer **254a** beneath its head is partially threaded into the fastener receiving opening of the first isolator plate mounting post **242b**. Upper and lower conical springs **256a** and **256b**—held in place by a fastener **258** partially threaded into the fastener receiving opening of the second isolator plate mounting post **244b**—sandwich the isolator plate **250**.

The hollow support **210b** and the stop washer **254a** constrain the vertical movement of the isolator plate **250**. In other words, the isolator plate **250** can move vertically between a lower position in which the grommet **252** contacts the hollow support **210b** and an upper position in which the grommet **252** contacts the stop washer **254a**. The conical springs **256a** and **256b** act as a suspension that absorbs (or partially absorbs) vibrations of the hollow support **210b** that would otherwise be directly transferred to the isolator plate **250**, which could affect operation of certain components of the multicopter **10** (such as the controller **272**).

The relatively high mass of the batteries **260a** to **260d** and the fact that they are mounted to the isolator plate **250** and close-coupled to the IMU **277** works with the suspension to help prevent undesired vibration of the isolator plate **250** and therefore the IMU **277**. In certain embodiments, for the IMU **277** to perform well, the IMU **277** must resolve accelerations on the order of 0.1 gee and rotations of 0.1 radians/second. The IMU **277** cannot do this reliably when (~10-gee) vibration, caused by rotor unbalance, for example, is transmitted from the airframe of the multicopter **10** to the IMU **277**. When the mass of the batteries **260a** to **260d** is used to ballast the IMU **277** on the isolator plate **250**, and the isolator plate **250** is anchored to the airframe structure through the suspension, the IMU **277** enjoys the vibration-free mounting location. By mounting the isolator plate **250** well-outboard at its corners, the IMU **277** remains sufficiently well-coupled to the airframe that pitch and roll movements are transmitted to the IMU **277**, which is able to effectively resolve these motions.

As best shown in FIGS. **3A** and **3B**, The following components are mounted to the isolator plate **250**: (1) the batteries **260a**, **260b**, **260c**, and **260d**; (2) the ESCs **265a** to **265h**; (3) an avionics enclosure **270** that houses a variety of components including the controller **272** and the communications interface **274**; (4) a GPS antenna mounting bracket **280** on which the GPS antenna **285** is mounted; (5) navigation lights (not shown); and (6) a Mode C transponder (not shown).

The four open ends of the hollow supports **210a** and **210b** form rotor arm module receiving sockets that can receive one of the rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d**. Specifically, the hollow support **210a** forms a first rotor arm module receiv-

ing socket **214a** and a third rotor arm module receiving socket (not shown) and the hollow support **210b** forms a second rotor arm module receiving socket **214b** and a fourth rotor arm module receiving socket (not shown).

As best shown in FIG. 3A, female blind mate assemblies are attached to the ends of the hollow supports **210a** and **210b**. Specifically, a first female blind mate assembly **230a** is attached to one end of the hollow support **210a** near the first rotor arm module receiving socket **214a**, a second female blind mate assembly **230b** is attached to one end of the hollow support **210b** near the second rotor arm module receiving socket **214b**, a third female blind mate assembly **230c** is attached to the other end of the hollow support **210a** near the third rotor arm module receiving socket **214c**, and a fourth female blind mate assembly **230d** is attached to the other end of the hollow support **210b** near the fourth rotor arm module receiving socket **214d**.

The female blind mate assemblies **230** (along with the corresponding male blind mate connectors described below with respect to the rotor arm modules) facilitate: (1) mechanical attachment of the rotor arm modules **400a**, **400b**, **400c**, and **400d** to the hub module **100**; (2) power flow from the battery(ies) **260a**, **260b**, **260c**, and/or **260d** to the rotor motors **465a** to **465h** of the rotor arm modules **400a**, **400b**, **400c**, and **400d**; and (3) communication between the ESCs **265a** to **265h** and the rotor motors **465a** to **465h**.

FIGS. 3G and 3H show the second female blind mate assembly **230b**. The female blind mate assemblies **230a**, **230c**, and **230d** are similar to the second female blind mate assembly **230b** and are therefore not separately shown or described.

The second female blind mate assembly **230b** includes: (1) a female blind mate connector **231b** including a plurality of pin receptacles (not labeled); (2) three elastomeric grommets **232b**; (3) three rigid, hollow cylindrical spacers **233b**; (4) three fasteners **234b**; (5) three nuts **235b**; (6) a mounting bracket **236b**; and (7) mounting bracket fasteners (not labeled).

Although not shown for clarity, the female blind mate connector **231b** and, particularly, the pin receptacles, are electrically connected to the corresponding ESCs **265c** and **265d** via wiring. In this example embodiment, the female blind mate connector **231b** includes 12 pin receptacles, six of which are connected to the ESC **265c** via wiring and the other six of which are connected to the ESC **265d** via wiring.

The mounting bracket **236b** is positioned at a desired location along the hollow support **210b**, and the mounting bracket fasteners are tightened to clamp the mounting bracket **236b** in place relative to the hollow support **210b**.

The female blind mate connector **231b** is flexurally mounted to the mounting bracket **236b** via the elastomeric grommets **232b**, the spacers **233b**, the fasteners **234b**, and the nuts **235b**. Specifically, the elastomeric grommets **232b** are fitted into corresponding cavities in the female blind mate connector **231b**. As best shown in FIG. 3H, each cavity includes an inwardly projecting annular rib that fits into a corresponding annular cutout of the corresponding elastomeric grommet **232b**. The spacers **233b** are disposed within longitudinal bores defined through the elastomeric grommets **232b**. The fasteners **234b** extend through the hollow spacers **233b** and through corresponding fastener receiving openings defined through the mounting bracket **236b** into their corresponding nuts **235b**. This secures the female blind mate connector **231b** to the mounting bracket **236b**.

This flexural mount of the female blind mate connector to the mounting bracket via the elastomeric grommets is beneficial compared to a rigid connection of the female blind

mate connector to the mounting bracket. The flexural mount enables the female blind mate connector to move—via deformation of the elastomeric grommet—relative to the mounting bracket (and the rest of the hub module) when loads are applied to the female blind mate connector, such as loads imposed on the female blind mate connector by the attached rotor arm module during flight. Because the female blind mate connector is not rigidly attached to the corresponding mounting bracket, it is less likely that the pins of the male blind mate connector (described below) received by the pin receptacles of the female blind mate connector will lose electrical contact—causing the multicopter **10** to lose control of at least one of its rotor motors—when loads are applied to the female blind mate connector.

As best shown in FIG. 3H, a latch plate **237** is attached to the underside of each hollow support **210a** and **210b** below each female blind mate connector **231** attached thereto. The latch plate **237** includes a claw engager **238** and a backstop **239**. The latch plate **237** is described below with respect to the locking assemblies **420** of the rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d**.

In some embodiments, the hub module (either the hub base, the saddle, or both) or other elements of the multicopter include ballast to obtain a desired weight distribution and/or provide stability during flight.

1.1.2 Saddle

FIGS. 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F, 4G, 4H, 4I, and 4J show the saddle **300** or components thereof. The saddle **300** is the portion of the hub module **100**: (1) to which the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is attached for launch; (2) from which the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is released for launch; and (3) to which the flexible capture member **5000** is attached for retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. The saddle **300** also enables the operator to vary the pitch angle of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** relative to the multicopter **10**.

As best shown in FIG. 4C, the saddle **300** includes a saddle base bracket **310** and first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b**. The first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b** are pivotably connected to opposite sides of the saddle base bracket **310** near the front end of the saddle base bracket **310**. The first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b** are also attached to opposite sides of the saddle base bracket **310** near the rear end of the saddle base bracket **310** via locking devices **322a** and **322b** (which are cam lever locks in this example embodiment but can be any suitable locking devices). The locking devices **322a** and **322b** extend through respective slots **321a** and **321b** defined through the respective first and second side plates **320a** and **320b**.

As shown in FIGS. 4D and 4E, the orientation of the slots **321a** and **321b** enables an operator to vary the angle α formed between a plane including the tops of the first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b**—to which the hub base **200** is attached—and a plane including the generally horizontally extending bottom portion of the saddle base plate **310**. The angle α generally corresponds to the angle formed between the hub base plate **202** of the hub base **200** and the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** when the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is attached to the saddle **300**. To change the angle α , the operator unlocks the locking devices **322a** and **322b**, rotates the first and second side plates **320a** and **320b** relative to the saddle base bracket **310** around their pivotable attachments to the saddle base bracket **310** to the desired rotational position (or vice-versa), and re-locks the locking devices **322a** and **322b**. In this example embodiment, the angle α is variable from about 0 degrees to about

10 degrees, though in other embodiments the angle α is variable between any suitable angles.

In certain embodiments, an operator can cause the first and second side plates to rotate relative to the saddle while the multicopter **10** is flying. For instance, the operator may desire to release the fixed-wing aircraft nose-down from a hover. Conversely, the operator may desire to release the fixed-wing aircraft nose-up (such as nose-up about 10 degrees) to facilitate launch while the multicopter is dashing forward (this nose-up pitch reduces wind drag and better aligns the thrust vector of the fixed-wing aircraft with the desired direction of travel). The multicopter may include any suitable combination of elements to facilitate this remote pivoting, such as various motors, actuators, and the like.

As best shown in FIGS. **4A**, **4B**, and **4C**, a stabilizing bracket **330** is attached to the first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b** and extends across the space between the first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b**. A downwardly curved front aircraft engaging bracket **340a** is attached to the underside of the saddle base bracket **310** near the front of the saddle base bracket **310**. A downwardly curved rear aircraft engaging bracket **340b** is attached to the underside of the saddle base bracket **310** near the rear of the saddle base bracket **310**.

As best shown in FIG. **4C**, a cam **350** is rotatably attached to and extends across the width of the saddle base bracket **310** such that the cam **350** is transverse (such as generally perpendicular) to the first and second saddle side plates **320a** and **320b**. As best shown in FIGS. **4F**, **4H**, and **4I**, the portion of the cam **350** near its longitudinal center has an irregularly shaped profile including a first relatively wide ridge **351**, a second relatively narrow ridge **353**, and a valley **352** between the first and second ridges **351** and **353**. This irregularly shaped profile facilitates attaching the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** to the cam **350** (and therefore to the multicopter **10**) and releasing the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from the cam **350** (and therefore from the multicopter **10**), as described below with respect to FIGS. **12A**, **12B**, and **12C**. The cam **350** also includes a cam control arm **354** and a foot **355** extending transversely (such as generally perpendicularly) from the longitudinal axis of the cam **350**.

An aircraft attaching/releasing assembly **380** attached to the saddle base bracket **310** controls rotation of the cam **350** relative to the saddle base bracket **310**. As best shown in FIG. **4G**, the aircraft attaching/releasing assembly **380** includes: (1) a cam servo motor **381** having a cam servo motor shaft **381a**; (2) a cam servo motor arm **382**; (3) a cam servo motor arm lock device **382a**; (4) upper and lower servo spacers **383a** and **383b**; (5) upper and lower nut plates **384a** and **384b**; (6) fasteners **385**; (7) a cam rotation control link **386** having connectors **386a** and **386b** at either end; (8) a lock servo motor **391** having a lock servo motor shaft **391a**; and (9) a lock servo arm **392** terminating at one end in a lock servo motor locking extension **392a**.

The cam servo motor **381** and the lock servo motor **391** are attached to one another and to the saddle base bracket **310** via the fasteners **385**, the upper and lower servo spacers **383a** and **383b**, and the upper and lower nut plates **384a** and **384b**. The cam servo motor arm **382** is attached near one end to the cam servo motor shaft **381a** and near the other end to the connector **386a**. The connector **386b** is attached to the cam control arm **354** of the cam **350**, which links the cam servo motor shaft **381a** to the cam **350**. The cam servo motor arm lock device **382a** is attached to the cam servo motor arm **382** between the connector **386a** and the cam servo motor shaft **381a**. The lock servo arm **392** is attached to the lock servo motor shaft **391a**. The rearwardly extending portion of

the lock servo arm **392** terminates in the lock servo motor locking extension **392a**, which is engageable to the cam servo motor arm lock device **382a** in certain instances.

The cam servo motor **381** controls rotation of the cam **350** relative to the saddle base bracket **310**. To rotate the cam **350**, the cam servo motor **381** rotates the cam servo motor shaft **381a**, which rotates the attached cam servo arm **382**, which in turn rotates the cam **350** via the cam rotation control link **386**. The cam servo motor **381** can rotate the cam **350** from an attached rotational position—shown in FIG. **4H**—to a release rotational position—shown in FIG. **4I** (and vice-versa).

The lock servo motor **391** controls rotation of the lock servo arm **392** between a cam rotation-preventing rotational position—shown in FIG. **4H**—and a cam rotation-enabling rotational position—shown in FIG. **4I** (and vice-versa). When the cam **350** is in the attached rotational position and the lock servo arm **392** is in the cam rotation-preventing rotational position, the lock servo motor locking extension **392a** engages the cam servo motor arm lock device **382a** of the cam servo motor arm **382**. This prevents the cam servo motor **381** from rotating the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position.

FIGS. **4H** and **4I** show how the cam servo motor **381** and the lock servo motor **391** operate to rotate the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position. Initially, the cam servo motor **381** is in the attached rotational position and the lock servo motor **391** is in the cam rotation-preventing rotational position. Here, the lock servo motor locking extension **392a** on the end of the lock servo arm **392** engages the cam servo motor arm lock device **382a** of the cam servo motor arm **382**.

Since the lock servo motor locking extension **392a** is engaged to the cam servo motor arm lock device **382a** of the cam servo motor arm **382**, the cam servo motor **381** cannot rotate the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position (counter-clockwise from this viewpoint).

Rotating the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position is a two-step process. The operator first operates the lock servo motor **391** to rotate the lock servo arm **392** into the cam rotation-enabling rotational position (counter-clockwise from this viewpoint). Second, the operator operates the cam servo motor **381** to rotate the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position (counter-clockwise from this viewpoint).

FIGS. **12A-12C**, described below, show how rotation of the cam from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position causes the fixed-wing aircraft to release from the cam.

The foot **355** controls the extent to which the cam **350** can rotate. The foot **355** is oriented such that when the cam **350** rotates a certain amount in a first direction relative to the saddle base bracket **310**, the foot **355** contacts the saddle base bracket **310** and prevents the cam **350** from rotating any further in that first direction. Similarly, when the cam **350** rotates a particular amount in a second opposite direction relative to the saddle base bracket **310**, the foot **355** contacts the saddle base bracket **310** and prevents the cam **350** from rotating any further in that second direction. The foot **355** is angled to stop the cam **350** from rotating before it exerts an undue force on the cam rotation control link **386**, and by extension the cam motor arm **382** and the cam motor shaft **381a**.

1.2 Rotor Arm Modules

The rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d** are mechanically attachable to and mechanically lockable to the hub module

200 and include: (1) the eight rotors of the multicopter 10; (2) the eight rotor motors that drive these rotors; (3) gear reduction trains that couple the rotor motors to their corresponding rotors; and (4) locking assemblies that lock the rotor arm modules 400a to 400d to the hub module 100.

FIGS. 5A, 5B, 5C, 5D, 5E, 5F, 5G, 5H, 5I, and 5J show the first rotor arm module 400a or components thereof. The other rotor arm modules 400b, 400c, and 400d are similar to the first rotor arm module 400a and are therefore not separately shown or described.

As best shown in FIGS. 5A, 5B, 5H, and 5J, the first rotor arm module 400a includes: (1) a generally rectangular hollow elongated rotor arm 410a; (2) a generally rectangular hollow rotor arm extension 410b; (3) a locking assembly 420; (4) a male blind mate connector 431; (5) upper and lower rotor motor assemblies 460a and 460b; and (6) a rotor assembly 470.

The rotor arm extension 410b is attached to the rotor arm 410a such that part of the rotor arm extension 410b is disposed within the rotor arm 410a and the remainder of the rotor arm extension 410b extends from the rotor arm 410a. The locking assembly 420 is attached to the underside of the rotor arm 410a near the end of the rotor arm 410a from which the rotor arm extension 410b extends. The male blind mate connector 431 is attached to the end of the rotor arm 410a from which the rotor arm extension 410b extends. The upper and lower rotor motor assemblies 460a and 460b and the rotor assembly 470 are attached to the rotor arm 410a in a manner described in detail below.

Although not shown, the open end of the rotor arm 410a opposite the end from which the rotor arm extension 410b extends forms a first front landing gear extension module receiving socket that can receive the first front landing gear extension module 500a, as described below.

As best shown in FIGS. 5A, 5B, 5C, 5D, 5E, and 5F, the male blind mate connector 431—along with its counterpart female blind mate connector 231a of the hub module 100—facilitate: (1) mechanical attachment of the first rotor arm module 400a to the hub module 100; (2) electrical power flow from the battery(ies) 260a, 260b, 260c, and/or 260d to the upper and lower rotor motors 465a and 465b of the first rotor arm module 400a; and (3) communication between the ESCs 265a and 265b their corresponding upper and lower rotor motors 465a and 465b.

The male blind mate connector 431 includes a plurality of pins 431a configured to mate with the pin receptacles of the female blind mate connector 231a. Although not shown for clarity, the male blind mate connector 431 and, particularly, the pins 431a, are electrically connected to the corresponding upper and lower rotor motors 465a and 465b via wiring. In this example embodiment, the male blind mate connector 431 includes 12 pins 431a, six of which are connected to the upper rotor motor 465a via wiring and the other six of which are connected to the lower rotor motor 465b via wiring. In this example embodiment, each motor only requires three motor leads to properly function, but the multicopter 10 includes two motor leads for each motor pole. By using two motor leads per motor pole, the multicopter 10 eliminates single-point failures (i.e., both leads would have to fail rather than just a single lead for the motor to fail).

To attach the rotor arm module 400a to the hub module 100, an operator inserts the rotor arm extension 410b into the first rotor arm module receiving socket 214 of the hub module 100 and slides the rotor arm module 400a toward the hub module 100 with enough force to mate the pins of the

male blind mate connector 431 with the pin receptacles of the female blind mate connector 231a of the hub module 100.

As best shown in FIGS. 5C, 5D, 5E, and 5F, the locking assembly 420 includes a drawcatch 420a and a drawcatch lock 420b that: (1) facilitate attaching the first rotor arm module 400a to the hub module 100; (2) lock the first rotor arm module 400a to the hub module 100; and (3) facilitate detachment of the first rotor arm module 400a from the hub module 100.

As best shown in FIG. 5C, the drawcatch 420a includes: (1) a base 421; (2) a lever 422; (3) a claw 423; (4) a first fastener 424 (such as a clevis pin or other suitable fastener); and (5) a second fastener 425 (such as a clevis pin or other suitable fastener).

The drawcatch lock 420b includes: (1) a base 426; (2) a lock/release device 427 having a locking shelf 427a; (3) a pin 428 (or other suitable connector); and (4) a compression spring 429 (or other suitable biasing element).

The base 421 is attached to the underside of the rotor arm 410a. The lever 422 is pivotably connected at one end to the base 421 via the first fastener 424. The other end of the lever 422 includes a handle 422a. The claw 423 is pivotably connected at one end to the lever 422 via the second fastener 425. The other end of the claw includes a latch plate engager 423a.

The base 426 is attached to the underside of the rotor arm 410a. The lock/release device 427 is pivotably connected to the base 426 via the pin 428. The compression spring 429 is disposed between the base 426 and the lock/release device 427 and retained in place via cavities and/or projections defined in or extending from these components (not shown).

The lock/release device 427 is rotatable about the pin 428 from a lock rotational position to a release rotational position. The compression spring 429 biases the lock/release device 427 to the lock rotational position. To rotate the lock/release device 427 from the lock rotational position to the release rotational position, the operator pushes the lock/release device 427 inward with enough force to overcome the spring-biasing force and compress the compression spring 429.

The operator uses the locking assembly 420 to lock the male blind mate connector 431 with the female blind mate connector 231a as follows. The operator rotates the handle 422a of the lever 422 around the first fastener 424 toward the latch plate 237 on the hollow support 210a of the hub module 100 and engages the claw engager 238 of the latch plate 237 with the latch plate engager 423a of the claw 423. The operator then rotates the handle 422a around the first fastener 424 and toward the lock/release device 427 until the handle 422a contacts the lock/release device 427. Continued rotation of the lever 422 forces the lock/release device 427 inward, which overcomes the spring-biasing force and begins compressing the compression spring 429. This causes the lock/release device 427 to being rotating to the release rotational position. Once the handle 422 rotates past the locking shelf 427a, the spring-biasing force of the compression spring 429 causes the lock/release device 427 to rotate back to the lock rotational position. At this point, the locking shelf 427a prevents the handle 422 from rotating back toward the latch plate 237, and the first rotor arm module 400a and the hub module 100 are locked together.

In addition to using the locking assembly 420 to lock the first rotor arm module 400a to the hub module 100, the operator can use the locking assembly 420 to facilitate mating the male blind mate connector 431 with the female blind mate connector 231a. If the male blind mate connector

431 and the female blind mate connector 231a are only partially mated (or not mated at all) and the latch plate engager 423a of the claw 423 is engaged to the claw engager 238 of the latch plate 237, rotating the handle 422a of the lever 422 around the first fastener 424 toward the lock/release device 427 to lock the handle 422a will pull the first rotor arm module 400a and the hub module 100 toward one another and cause the male blind mate connector 431 to mate with the female blind mate connector 231a.

As shown in FIGS. 5D and 5E, the operator reverses this process to unlock the first rotor arm module 400a from the hub module 100. The operator pushes the lock/release device 427 inward with enough force to overcome the spring-biasing force and to compress the compression spring 429, which causes the lock/release device 427 to rotate to the release rotational position. This frees the handle 422a to rotate. Once the handle 422a rotates past the locking shelf 427a, the operator rotates the handle 422a of the lever 422 around the first fastener 424 toward the latch plate 237 and disengages the latch plate engager 423a of the claw 423 from the claw engager 238 of the latch plate 237.

At this point, the operator can either physically pull the first rotor arm module 400a and the hub module 100 apart to separate the male and female blind mate connectors 431 and 231a or use the locking assembly 420 to aid in detachment. When using the locking assembly 420 to aid in detachment, as shown in FIG. 5F, after disengaging the latch plate engager 423a from the claw engager 238, the operator continues rotating the handle 422a toward the latch plate 237 until the latch plate engager 423a contacts the backstop 239 of the latch plate 237. Afterward, continued rotation of the handle 422a toward the latch plate 237 causes the latch plate engager 423a to impose a pushing force against the backstop 239, which forces the first rotor arm module 400a and the hub module 100 apart.

Turning to the upper and lower rotor motor assemblies 460a and 460b and the rotor assembly 470a, the upper and lower rotor motors 465a and 465b of the upper and lower motor assemblies independently drive respective upper and lower rotors 475a and 475b via separate gear reduction trains.

As best shown in FIGS. 5G and 5H, the upper rotor motor assembly 460a includes: (1) an upper rotor motor mount 461a, (2) an upper bearing spider 462a, (3) an upper pinion 463a, (4) upper bearings 464a, (5) the upper rotor motor 465a, (6) an upper bearing 466a, (7) an upper bearing cup 467a, (8) an upper two-piece cooling fan collar 490a, and (9) an upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a.

The upper rotor motor 465a is attached to the upper rotor motor mount 461a. The bearing spider 462a is attached to the upper rotor motor mount 461a. The upper bearings 464a are disposed on the motor shaft (not labeled) of the upper rotor motor 465a. The upper drive pinion 463a is disposed on the upper bearings 464a and on the motor shaft of the upper rotor motor 465a such that the upper drive gear 463a rotates with the motor shaft. The upper bearing 466a within the upper bearing cup 467a is disposed on the motor shaft of the upper rotor motor 465a. The upper bearing cup 467a is attached to the upper bearing spider 462a. The upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a is press-fit around the bottom of the upper rotor motor 465a and held in place via the upper two-piece cooling fan collar 490a.

The lower rotor motor assembly 460b includes: (1) a lower rotor motor mount 461b, (2) a lower bearing spider 462b, (3) a lower pinion 463b, (4) lower bearings 464b, (5) the lower rotor motor 465b, (6) a lower bearing 466b, (7) a

lower bearing cup 467b, (8) a lower two-piece cooling fan collar 490b, and (9) a lower rotor motor cooling fan 495b.

The lower rotor motor 465b is attached to the lower rotor motor mount 461b. The lower bearing spider 462b is attached to the lower rotor mount 461b. The lower bearings 464b are disposed on the motor shaft (not labeled) of the lower rotor motor 465b. The lower pinion 463b is disposed on the lower bearings 464b and on the motor shaft of the lower rotor motor 465b such that the lower pinion 463b rotates with the motor shaft. The lower bearing 466b within the lower bearing cup 467b is disposed on the motor shaft of the lower rotor motor 465b. The lower bearing cup 467b is attached to the lower bearing spider 462b. The lower rotor motor cooling fan 495b is press-fit around the bottom of the lower rotor motor 465a and held in place via the lower two-piece cooling fan collar 490b.

The upper cooling fan collar 490a and the upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a are shown in detail in FIG. 5I. The lower cooling fan collar 490b and the lower rotor motor cooling fan 495b are similar to the upper cooling fan collar 490a and the upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a and are therefore not separately shown or described.

The upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a includes a generally annular body that defines a plurality of cooling fan openings 496a through its side walls (not labeled). A collar connection lip 497a extends upward from body and radially outward. A generally annular motor mounting shelf 498a extends radially inward from the bottom of the body. A plurality of motor seats 499a extend upward from the motor mounting shelf 498a.

The upper cooling fan collar 490a includes two identical collar halves 491a having generally half-annular bodies. An upper rotor motor mating surface 492a that extends around the (half) circumference of the collar half 491a is grooved to correspond with and mate with grooves on the exterior of the upper rotor motor 465a. A lip retaining chamber 493a that extends around the (half) circumference of the collar half 491a is shaped to receive and retain the lip 497a of the upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a.

The bottom of the upper rotor motor 465a is disposed within the space defined by the inner cylindrical surface of the cooling fan 495a such that the bottom of the upper rotor motor 465a contacts the motor seats 499a. The cooling fan openings 496a of the cooling fan 495a are generally aligned with corresponding cooling fan openings of the upper rotor motor 465. The collar halves 491 are fit onto the upper rotor motor 465a and the cooling fan 495a such that: (1) the lip retaining chambers 493a of the collar halves 491 receive the lip 497a of the upper rotor motor cooling fan 495a; and (2) the upper rotor motor mating surfaces 492a of the collar halves 491 mate with the grooves on the exterior of the upper rotor motor 465a. Two fasteners (not labeled) attach the collar halves 491a to each other to prevent separation.

The cooling fans solve two problems: limited motor power output due to overheating and motors falling apart. First, the power output of the rotor motors depends to a certain extent on cooling—power output generally decreases the hotter the rotor motors get. The cooling fans enlarge the radius of the cooling fan openings of the rotor motors. The increased radius drives cooling air at a greater flow rate, which improves cooling and allows motors to be used safely at increased loads without fear of failure.

Second, the flux rings of the rotor motors are typically glued onto the end caps of the rotor motors. This attachment is not secure due to the temperatures the rotor motors reach and the vibrations that occur during flight. The cooling fan collars double as redundant load paths for the motor flux

rings since they mechanically engage the grooves on the exterior of the upper rotor motor, which eliminates the chance of the flux ring working its way off of the end cap.

As best shown in FIG. 5J, the rotor assembly 470 includes a spindle 470a and the following components rotatably mounted to the spindle 470a: (1) an upper retaining ring 471a, (2) a lower retaining ring 471b, (3) upper bearings 472a and 477a, (4) lower bearings 472b and 477b, (5) upper bearing cups 473a and 478a, (6) lower bearing cups 473b and 478b, (7) an upper torque tube 474a, (8) a lower torque tube 474b, (9) an upper rotor 475a, (10) a lower rotor 475b, (11) an upper driven gear 476a, (12) a lower driven gear 476b, (13) an upper spacer 479a, and (14) a lower spacer 479b.

Turning to the upper portion of the rotor assembly 470, the bearing 472a is disposed within the bearing cup 473a, which is fixedly attached to the top of the rotor 475a. The torque tube 474a is fixedly attached at one end to the underside of the rotor 475a and at the other end to top of the driven gear 476a. The bearing 477a is disposed within the bearing cup 478a, which is fixedly attached to the underside of the driven gear 476a. The spacer 479a is disposed between the bearing 477a and the upper rotor motor mount 461a. The upper retaining ring 471a is seated in a groove defined around the spindle 470a and prevents these components from sliding off of the spindle 470a.

Turning to the lower portion of the rotor assembly 470, the bearing 472b is disposed within the bearing cup 473b, which is fixedly attached to the bottom of the rotor 475b. The torque tube 474b is fixedly attached at one end to the top of the rotor 475b and at the other end to underside of the driven gear 476b. The bearing 477b is disposed within the bearing cup 478b, which is fixedly attached to the top of the driven gear 476b. The spacer 479b is disposed between the bearing 477b and the lower rotor motor mount 461b. The lower retaining ring 471b is seated in a groove defined around the spindle 470a and prevents these components from sliding off of the spindle 470a.

The spindle 470a extends through two vertically aligned spindle receiving openings (not labeled) defined through the rotor arm 410a. This prevents the spindle 470a from substantially translating relative to the rotor arm 410a. And since all of the components of the upper and lower motor assemblies 460a and 460b and the rotor assembly 470 are attached to the spindle 470a (directly or indirectly), the fact that the spindle 470a extends through the spindle receiving openings defined through the rotor arm 410a prevents any of the components of the upper and lower motor assemblies 460a and 460b and the rotor assembly 470 from substantially translating relative to the rotor arm 410a.

To prevent the upper and lower rotor motors 465a and 465b (and certain components attached thereto) from rotating relative to the rotor arm 410a, the upper and lower rotor motor mounts 461a and 461b are attached to both an inner bracket 480a and an outer bracket 480b. The brackets 480a and 480b are disposed around the rotor arm 410a, as best shown in FIGS. 5A, 5B, and 5J.

In operation, the controller 272 and the ESC 265a control the rate and direction of rotation of the motor shaft of the upper rotor motor 465a, which drives the upper pinion 463a, which in turn drives the upper driven gear 476a. Since the upper driven gear 476a is fixedly attached to the upper rotor 475a without any further gear reduction, the upper rotor 475a rotates at the same rate as and in the same rotational direction as the upper driven gear 476a. Similarly, the controller 272 and the ESC 265b control the rate and direction of rotation of the motor shaft of the lower rotor

motor 465b, which drives the lower pinion 463b, which in turn drives the lower driven gear 476b. Since the lower driven gear 476b is fixedly attached to the lower rotor 475b without any further gear reduction, the lower rotor 475b rotates at the same rate as and in the same rotational direction as the lower driven gear 476b.

In this embodiment, the upper and lower rotors are generally the same size and shape. In another embodiment, the lower rotors are larger than (such as about 7% larger than) the upper rotors to compensate for the fact that the lower rotors operate in the upper rotors' downwash. Running larger lower rotors is one way to improve load sharing of upper and lower motors of a multicopter with counter-rotating blades. Another way to improve load sharing is to select a lower gear-reduction for the lower rotors. Yet another way is to select motors with higher KV (rpm/volt) values. Yet another way is to select lower rotors with coarser pitch.

1.3 Front Landing Gear Extension Modules and Landing Gear Modules

FIGS. 6A and 7A show the first front landing gear extension module 500a and the first front landing gear module 600a, respectively. The front landing gear modules (along with the rear landing gear modules, described below) support the multicopter 10 when assembled but not flying, and facilitate launch and landing of the multicopter 10 without damaging the multicopter 10. The front landing gear extensions are used to attach the front landing gear to the respective rotor arm modules, and also enable the front landing gear to move relative to the rotor arm modules to prevent rotor rotation in certain instances.

The second front landing gear extension module 500b and the second front landing gear module 600b are similar to the first front landing gear extension module 500a and the first front landing gear module 600a and are therefore not separately shown or described.

The first front landing gear extension module 500a includes a generally rectangular hollow support 510a, a landing gear module securing device 520 attached at one end of the support 510a, and a front landing gear locking device 530 (which is a cam lever lock in this embodiment but can be any suitable locking device) attached to the landing gear module securing device 520.

The first front landing gear module 600a includes a generally cylindrical leg 610, a generally semicircular foot 620 attached to a bottom end of the leg 610, and a collar 630 attached near the top end of the leg 610 via a fastener 632 (such as a set screw).

The front landing gear locking device 530 enables an operator to attach the first front landing gear module 600a to the first front landing gear extension module 500a. To do so, the operator unlocks the front landing gear locking device 530, inserts the first front landing gear module 600a into the landing gear module securing device 520 until the collar 630 is disposed within the landing gear module securing device 520, and re-locks the front landing gear locking device 530. The operator reverses this process to detach the first front landing gear module 600a from the first front landing gear extension module 500a.

The operator attaches the first front landing gear extension module 500a to the first rotor arm module 400a by inserting the end of the support 510a opposite the end to which the landing gear module securing device 520 is attached into the front landing gear extension module receiving socket of the first rotor arm module 400a. The operator then locks the first front landing gear extension module 500a into place, such as using suitable fasteners.

Although not shown, the operator can move the front landing gear module further radially inward or further radially outward by sliding the support of the front landing gear extension module further into or further out of the rotor arm of the corresponding rotor arm module. This enables the operator to move the front landing gear module from a first position in which the front landing gear module is clear of the rotors radially inward to a second position in which the rotors contact the front landing gear module. When in the second position, the front landing gear module prevents the rotors from rotating.

1.4 Rear Landing Gear Extension Modules and Landing Gear Module

FIGS. 6B and 7B show the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** and the first rear landing gear module **600c**, respectively. The rear landing gear modules (along with the front landing gear modules, described above) support the multicopter **10** when assembled but not flying, and facilitate launch and landing of the multicopter **10** without damaging the multicopter **10**. The rear landing gear modules are shaped such that they act as vertical stabilizers (or fins) during flight, ensuring that the front of the multicopter **10** (and the nose of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**, if attached thereto) points generally into the airflow. The rear landing gear extensions are used to attach the rear landing gear to the respective rotor arm modules, and also enable the rear landing gear to move relative to the rotor arm modules to prevent rotor rotation in certain instances.

The second rear landing gear extension module **500d** and the second rear landing gear module **600d** are similar to the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** and the first rear landing gear module **600c** and are therefore not separately shown or described.

The first rear landing gear extension module **500c** is a rectangular hollow support **510c**.

The first rear landing gear module **600c** includes a body having a generally triangular cross-section that tapers from front to back. The body includes two side surfaces **650a** and **650b** and a front surface **650c** joining the side surfaces **650a** and **650b**. The side surfaces **650a** and **650b** are substantially longer than the front surface **650c** is wide. The body transitions at its bottom into a generally circular foot **670**. A rear landing gear extension module receiving socket is defined by a hollow rectangular support **680** extending through the body.

The operator attaches the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** to the third landing gear module **600c** by inserting one end of the support **510c** of the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** into the rear landing gear extension module receiving socket of the support **680**. The operator then locks the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** into place, such as using suitable fasteners.

The operator attaches the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** to the third rotor arm module **400c** by inserting the end of the support **510c** of the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** opposite the end to which the first rear landing gear module **600c** is attached into the rear landing gear extension module receiving socket of the third rotor arm module **400c**. The operator then locks the first rear landing gear extension module **500c** into place, such as using suitable fasteners.

Once attached, the rear landing gear modules are oriented such that the side surfaces of the rear landing gear modules are substantially aligned with the saddle side brackets **320a** and **320b** of the saddle **300**, as best shown in FIG. 1B. When the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is attached to the multicopter **10**, these side surfaces of the rear landing gear modules are

substantially parallel to a plane containing the roll axis of the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. The relatively long length of these side surfaces of the rear landing gear modules and their placement well-aft of the center-of-lift of the multicopter **10** cause the rear landing gear module to act as fins. This weather vane effect ensures that the nose of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is oriented into the airflow when airborne. Good flow alignment is critically important for spin avoidance at the moment the multicopter **10** releases the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**, when the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** may be operating well-below stall speed.

In certain embodiments, one or more of the landing gear modules includes a shock absorber.

1.5 Separately Powered Upper and Lower Rotor Motors

As noted above, four batteries **260a** to **260d** power the multicopter **10**, though in other embodiments a different quantity of batteries and/or different type(s) of batteries power the multicopter. In other embodiments, any suitable power source(s), such as a fuel-based power source or a solar-based power source, may be used instead of or along with batteries.

In this embodiment, a first pair of batteries **260a** and **260b** are connected in series and a second pair of batteries **260c** and **260d** are connected in series. Here, the first pair of batteries **260a** and **260b** power the upper rotor motors and do not power the lower rotor motors, while the second pair of batteries **260c** and **260d** power the lower rotor motors and do not power the upper rotor motors. This configuration ensures that, if one pair of batteries fails, the multicopter **10** is operable in a quadcopter mode with either all four upper rotor motors (if the second pair of batteries **260c** and **260d** fails) or all four lower rotor motors (if the first pair of batteries **260a** and **260b** fails).

The multicopter **10** also includes a gang circuit that connects the two pairs of batteries in parallel to enable a single charger connected to one of the pairs of batteries to also charge the other pair of batteries. The gang circuit is overload-protected and includes an automatically resetting circuit breaker. The gang circuit is beneficial because it reduces charging time, allowing an operator to recharge both batteries in parallel when only one charger is available.

1.6 Multicopter Operating Modes

The multicopter **10** is operable in one of two throttle modes: NORMAL throttle mode and TENSION throttle mode. The multicopter **10** is operable in three different flight modes: ALTHOLD flight mode, LOITER flight mode, and RTL flight mode. The multicopter **10** is operable in a half-power mode to, in certain situations, improve response and save power. The basic functionality of each operating mode is described below. The operator can toggle between these operating modes using suitable switches, a touch screen, or any other suitable device on the R/C controller.

On a typical R/C controller including left and right joysticks, the left joystick is typically used for throttle, while the right joystick is typically used for left/right and for/aft station-keeping of the aircraft.

1.6.1 SIMPLE Control Mode

SIMPLE control mode simplifies horizontal control by tying the R/C controller's right stick commands to geo-referenced coordinates. The multicopter **10** always operates in SIMPLE control mode, regardless of which of the three flight modes the multicopter **10** employs. Under SIMPLE control mode, forward right stick deflection drives the multicopter **10** in the direction in which the multicopter **10** was pointed at the instant it was armed, regardless of its yaw orientation during flight. Put differently, if the multicopter **10** was pointed North when armed but, while hovering for

instance, the multicopter **10** rotated about its yaw axis such that its nose is pointed East, forward right stick deflection still drives the multicopter **10** North. While the operator may use the left stick to rotate the multicopter **10** about the yaw axis, this (rudder) input is rarely needed for launch or retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. The rear landing gear modules ensure the multicopter **10** is pointed into the relative wind (like a weathervane), so the operator need not worry about aligning the fuselage with airflow.

1.6.2 TENSION Throttle Mode

When the multicopter **10** operates in TENSION throttle mode, the human operator has direct control over the throttle. The multicopter **10** can only be operated in TENSION throttle mode when it is operated in either ALTHOLD or LOITER flight modes. That is, the multicopter **10** cannot be operated in TENSION throttle mode when operated in RTL flight mode. TENSION throttle mode converts throttle stick inputs to direct throttle commands, which is primarily useful for tensioning the flexible capture tether **5000** during retrieval. An astute operator will climb at a controlled rate by feathering the throttle in TENSION throttle mode, he will slow high ascent as the tether pulls tight (described below), and then he maintains light tether tension, keeping the line straight as the fixed-wing aircraft approaches. The straight line allows human observers to confirm that the line will be swept by the fixed-wing leading edge and the capture is on-target. At impact, the operator increases throttle to arrest the fixed-wing aircraft's horizontal motion and minimize altitude loss. Then he feathers the throttle back to lower the aircraft to the ground.

1.6.3 NORMAL Throttle Mode

In Normal throttle mode, the controller interprets joystick commands as desired rate commands and applies whatever throttle is needed to achieve that climb or descent rate. When tethered to the ground the altitude controller very abruptly increases throttle to maximum (when its desired altitude is above current altitude) or it plummets to minimum throttle (when desired altitude is below current altitude) without regard for joystick position. This behavior makes it impossible for the human operator to regulate tether tension directly. Direct throttle control, offered by TENSION throttle mode, disables the altitude controller. In this mode, altitude is controlled strictly by tether length. In Tension Mode, the human operator controls tether tension directly, with throttle inputs, and the controller responds with lift-producing motor commands that are roughly proportional to commanded throttle position. By this technique, the retrieval process enjoys improved finesse and precise control without overworking the multicopter motors and batteries.

1.6.4 ALTHOLD Flight Mode

ALTHOLD flight mode converts throttle commands (left stick, vertical axis) to vertical rate commands. When operating in the ALTHOLD flight mode, the multicopter **10** will attempt to maintain current altitude when the left stick is in the middle position. The multicopter **10** will attempt to climb at up to 5 meters per second (or any other suitable rate) when the left stick is pushed up to max. The multicopter **10** will descend at up to 5 meters per second (or any other suitable rate) when the left stick is pulled to min. ALTHOLD flight mode converts right stick commands to lean angle, with maximum right stick deflection corresponding to 30 degrees (or any other suitable angle). When operating in ALTHOLD flight mode, the multicopter **10** will maintain zero lean when the right stick is in the middle position and will be blown downwind. If the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is mated to the multicopter **10** and producing thrust, this thrust will drive the multicopter **10** forward unopposed by lean

angle. ALTHOLD flight mode does not depend on GPS for control, and works equally well indoors and in all locations where GPS reception is spotty or denied. ALTHOLD flight mode uses a compass for navigation, which means “SIMPLE MODE” works equally well without the use of GPS. Consequently, the operator simply pushes the right joystick gently into the wind for station-keeping, fully into the wind to execute a “dash” maneuver (for launch/release), and he will relax the right stick to allow the aircraft to drift downwind to return home after a dash. Finally, the operator will deflect the right stick opposite the aircraft's ground track to minimize ground speed just before touch-down.

1.6.5 LOITER Flight Mode

LOITER flight mode behaves like ALTHOLD flight mode in the vertical direction (i.e., converts throttle commands to vertical rate commands). Similarly, LOITER flight mode converts right stick inputs to horizontal rate commands. When operating in LOITER flight mode, the multicopter **10** attempts to maintain its current horizontal position over the Earth when the right stick is in the middle position. Maximum right stick deflection drives the multicopter **10** in the corresponding direction at up to 20 meters per second ground speed (or any suitable rate) or the maximum achievable speed against true wind, whichever is less. LOITER flight mode depends on GPS to close feedback loops around latitude and longitude positions. The controller **272** will automatically switch itself from LOITER flight mode to ALTHOLD flight mode when GPS reception is unacceptable, and will not allow a human operator to arm in LOITER flight mode when GPS reception is unacceptable.

1.6.6 RTL Flight Mode

Return to Launch (RTL) flight mode autonomously returns the multicopter **10** to its home position—i.e., the place on Earth where it was last armed. When operating in RTL mode, left stick inputs are ignored except when executing a SHUT DOWN command, and right stick inputs are used only during the final (vertical) descent phase. The operator uses the right stick to “nudge” the multicopter **10** a designated distance away from the storage and launch system **2000** to avoid interference at touchdown. Multicopter response to these nudge maneuvers will be similar to right stick inputs in LOITER flight mode, and the operator should execute them before the aircraft descends below 5 meters (or any other suitable distance) above ground level. To avoid human operator-induced oscillations and to minimize ground speed, the human operator's fingers should be kept off the control sticks during final descent and touchdown in RTL mode.

1.6.7 Half-Power Mode

When operating in half-power mode, the multicopter **10** shuts down half of its rotors—either the lower rotors or the upper rotors—and operates using only the remaining half of the rotors. Half-power mode is typically used after the multicopter **10** releases the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** and the multicopter **10** is returning to its home position. Using all eight rotors to fly just the multicopter **10**, which is relatively light when not carrying the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**, provides too much power and induces sluggish response to operator commands. This is not ideal, especially when launching the multicopter **10** from an area full of obstructions that the multicopter **10** must deftly avoid on its way back to its home position. Operating in half-power mode in these instances provides a more appropriate amount of power and enables more precise responses to operator commands.

2. Storage and Launch System

The storage and launch system **2000** is shown in FIGS. **8A**, **8B**, **8C**, **8D**, **8E**, **8F**, **8G**, **8H**, and **8I**. The storage and

launch system **2000** is usable to compactly store the modular multicopter **10** in a single container after disassembly into the 13 modules and to facilitate launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** into free, wing-borne flight by acting as a launch mount for the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**.

To facilitate storage of the multicopter **10** in a single container (including a container top **2000a** and a container bottom **2000b**), the storage and launch system **2000** includes: (1) a launch-assist assembly **2100** to which the front landing gear modules **600a** and **600b** are attachable; (2) a rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** to which the rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d** and the rear landing gear modules **600c** and **600d** are attachable; and (3) a hub module storage tray **2300** to which the hub module **100** is attachable.

To facilitate launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**, the launch-assist assembly **2100** is movable from a storage position into a launch position and includes certain elements on which the fixed-wing aircraft can be mounted and other elements that retain the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** in a launch orientation before launch. Example embodiments of each of these elements are described below, followed by a description of an example method of storing the multicopter **10** using these example embodiments of the elements.

2.1 Launch-Assist Assembly

The launch-assist assembly **2100** is attached to the container bottom **2000b** and is one element of the storage and launch system **2000** that facilitates launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. The launch-assist assembly **2100** is movable from a position in which it lies substantially flat along the floor of the container bottom **2000a** to enable storage of the multicopter **10** to a launch position in which it is generally spaced-apart from and upwardly angled relative to the floor of the container bottom **2000a** to facilitate launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**.

As best shown in FIG. **8C**, the launch-assist assembly **2100** includes: (1) first and second base brackets **2102a** and **2102b**; (2) first and second front legs **2104a** and **2104b**; (3) first and second rear legs **2106a** and **2106b**; (4) a tray **2108**; (5) first and second front landing gear module retainers **2110a** and **2110b**; (6) a storage device lock engager **2112**; (7) front and rear stabilizing brackets **2114a** and **2114b**; (8) first and second lockable gas springs **2116a** and **2116b**; and (9) an aircraft-engaging bracket **2120**.

The first and second base brackets **2102a** and **2102b** are attached to the floor of the container bottom **2000a** near one end. The first front leg **2104a** is pivotably attached at one end to the front end of the first base bracket **2102a** and pivotably attached at the other end to the tray **2108**. Similarly, the second front leg **2104b** is pivotably attached at one end to the front end of the second base bracket **2102b** and pivotably attached at the other end to the tray **2108**. The first rear leg **2106a** is pivotably attached at one end to the rear end of the first base bracket **2102a** and pivotably attached at the other end to the tray **2108**. Similarly, the second rear leg **2106b** is pivotably attached at one end to the rear end of the second base bracket **2102b** and pivotably attached at the other end to the tray **2108**. The front stabilizing bracket **2114a** is attached to and extends between the first and second front legs **2104a** and **2104b**, and the rear stabilizing bracket **2114b** is attached to and extends between the first and second rear legs **2106a** and **2106b**. The first lockable gas spring **2116a** is pivotably attached at one end to the first base bracket **2102a** between the first front leg **2104a** and the first rear leg **2106a** and pivotably attached at the other end to the first front leg **2104a** between the first base bracket **2102a** and the tray **2108**. Similarly, the second lockable gas spring

2116b is pivotably attached at one end to the second base bracket **2102b** between the second front leg **2104b** and the second rear leg **2106b** and pivotably attached at the other end to the second front leg **2104b** between the second base bracket **2102b** and the tray **2108**. The storage device lock engager **2112**, the first and second front landing gear module retainers **2110a** and **2110b**, and the aircraft engaging bracket **2120** are attached to the tray **2108**.

The aircraft engaging bracket **2120** includes two spaced-apart generally parallel sides **2121** and **2123** having wing engaging surfaces **2121a** and **2123a**, respectively, and a back **2122** transverse (such as generally perpendicular) to, extending between, and connecting the sides **2121** and **2123**. A fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** is rotatably mounted to the back plate **2122**.

The above-described pivotable attachments enable the launch assist assembly **2100** to move from: (1) a storage position in which the first and second front legs **2104a** and **2104b**, the first and second back legs **2106a** and **2106b**, and the tray **2108** lay substantially flat along the floor of the container bottom **2000a** (as best shown in FIGS. **8A** and **8B**); to (2) a launch position in which the first and second front legs **2104a** and **2104b** and the first and second back legs **2106a** and **2106b** extend upward from the floor of the container bottom **2000a** such that the tray **2108** is spaced-apart from and upwardly angled relative to the floor of the container bottom **2000a** (as best shown in FIGS. **8C** and **8D**) (and vice-versa). The operator can lock the launch assist assembly **2100** in the launch position by locking the first and second lockable gas springs **2116a** and **2116b**.

When in the launch position, the launch assist assembly **2100** facilitates launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** by orienting the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** in a desired launch orientation and retaining the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** in that orientation until the operator desires to launch the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. As best shown in FIG. **8D**, in preparation for launch, the operator inserts the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** into the fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** of the aircraft engaging bracket **2120** and lays the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** atop the first and second wing engaging surfaces **2123a** and **2123b** of the aircraft engaging bracket **2120**.

The fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** is sized to receive the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. The fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** is configured such that, after it receives the fuselage, the fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** does not release the fuselage until: (1) the operator disengages a safety mechanism; and (2) a force biasing the fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** against releasing the fuselage is overcome. This prevents undesired launch of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**.

As best shown in FIGS. **8E**, **8F**, and **8G**, the fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** includes: (1) first and second pincers **2132** and **2134**; (2) first and second rollers **2136** and **2138** and corresponding nuts **2136a** and **2138a**; (3) a grooved clevis pin **2140** and corresponding retaining ring **2140a**, spacer **2140b**, and washer **2140c**; (4) first and second spring mounting spacers **2142** and **2144** and their corresponding fasteners **2142a** and **2144a** and nuts **2142b** and **2144b**; (5) a compression spring **2146**; and (6) a safety mechanism **2150**.

The safety mechanism **2150** includes: (1) front and rear plates **2151** and **2152**; (2) fasteners **2154a** and **2154e**; (3) clevis pins **2154b**, **2154c**, and **2154d**; (4) spacers **2156a** and **2156e**; (5) a rod end **2156b**; (6) a compression spring **2158**; and (7) a handle **2160**.

The first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** are interchangeable, and have generally curved bodies that define rod end engagers **2132a** and **2134a**, respectively, along their outer edges and terminate at their lower ends in safety mechanism engagers **2132b** and **2134b**. The roller **2136** is attached via the nut **2136a** to the upper end of the first pincer **2132**, and the roller **2138** is attached via the nut **2138a** to the upper end of the second pincer **2134**. The rollers are rotatable with respect to their respective pincers. The first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** are pivotably connected to one another via the grooved clevis pin **2140**, the spacer **2140b**, the washer **2140c**, and the retaining ring **2140a**. Although not shown, the fuselage-retaining assembly **2130** is attached to the aircraft engaging bracket **2120** via this grooved clevis pin **2140**.

In this embodiment, the first pincer is mounted on the grooved clevis pin in front of the second pincer (with respect to the view shown in FIG. **8E**), though in other embodiments the second pincer may be mounted in front of the first pincer without changing how the fuselage-retaining assembly operates.

As best shown in FIG. **8G**, the spring mounting spacer **2142** is mounted to a backwardly extending portion of the first pincer **2132** via the fastener **2142a** and the nut **2142b**. Similarly, the spring mounting spacer **2144** is mounted to a backwardly extending portion of the second pincer **2134** via the fastener **2144a** and the nut **2144b**. The compression spring **2146** is mounted on and extends between the spring mounting spacers **2142** and **2144**.

The first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** are movable relative to one another from: (1) a fuselage-retaining orientation in which their upper ends are separated a first distance that is smaller than the diameter of the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** (shown in FIGS. **8E** and **8F**); to (2) a fuselage-release orientation in which their upper ends are separated a second distance that is larger than the diameter of the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** (not shown) (and vice-versa). Thus, when the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** are in the fuselage-retaining orientation, the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft cannot escape the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** (absent further separation of the pincers), while the fuselage can escape when the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** are in the fuselage-release orientation.

The compression spring **2146** opposes separation of the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** and therefore biases the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** toward the fuselage-retaining orientation. Separating the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** causes the backwardly extending portions of the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** to compress the compression spring **2146**, which causes the compression spring **2146** to exert forces on the backwardly extending portions of the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** opposing that separation. Thus, to release the fuselage, this biasing force must be overcome.

Turning to the safety mechanism **2150**, as best shown in FIG. **8E**, the front plate **2151**, the rear plate **2152**, and the handle **2160** are attached to one another via: (1) the fastener **2154a** extending through an opening **2152a** in the rear plate **2152**, through the spacer **2156a**, through an opening **2151a** in the front plate **2151**, and into the handle **2160**; (2) the clevis pin **2154b** extending through an opening **2152a** in the rear plate **2152**, through an opening in the rod end **2156b**, and through an opening **2151b** in the front plate **2151**; (3) the clevis pin **2154d** extending through an opening **2152d** in the second plate and an opening **2151d** in the front plate **2151**; and (4) the fastener **2154e** extending through an opening

2152e in the rear plate **2152**, through the spacer **2156e**, and through an opening **2151e** in the front plate **2151**.

As best shown in FIGS. **8E** and **8F**, the safety mechanism **2150** is pivotably connected to the second pincer **2134** via the clevis pin **2154c** extending through an opening **2152c** in the rear plate **2152**, an opening **2134c** in the second pincer **2134**, and an opening **2151c** in the front plate **2151**. One end of the safety compression spring **2158** is disposed around the rod end **2156b** and the other end of the safety compression spring **2158** is disposed around the rod end engager **2134a** of the second pincer **2134**.

The safety mechanism **2150** is rotatable about the clevis pin **2134c** from an engaged rotational position in which the safety mechanism **2150** prevents separation of the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** from the fuselage-retaining orientation to the fuselage-release orientation (shown in FIGS. **8F** and **8G**) to a disengaged rotational position (not shown) in which the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** are free to separate from the fuselage-retaining orientation to the fuselage-release orientation. The safety compression spring **2158** biases the safety mechanism **2150** into the engaged rotational position.

When in the engaged rotational position, the safety mechanism **2150** prevents separation of the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** from the fuselage-retaining orientation to the fuselage-release orientation. Separating the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** when the safety mechanism **2150** is in the engaged rotational position results in: (1) the safety mechanism engager **2132b** of the first pincer **2132** engaging the clevis pin **2154d** (since the clevis pin **2154d** is in the path of rotation of the safety mechanism engager **2132b** of the first pincer **2132**); and (2) the rod end engager **2134a** of the second pincer **2134** engaging the rod end **2136b**. This prevents the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** from rotation relative to one another and therefore prevents further separation of the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** to the fuselage-release orientation.

To enable the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** to separate from the fuselage-retaining orientation to the fuselage-release orientation, the operator disengages the safety mechanism by rotating the safety mechanism **2150** from the engaged rotational position to the disengaged rotational position. To do so, the operator pulls the handle **2160** upward with enough force to overcome the spring-biasing force of the compression spring **2158** and compress the compression spring **2158** until the clevis pin **2154d** is no longer in the path of rotation of the safety mechanism engager **2132b** of the first pincer **2132**. At this point, the safety mechanism **2150** is in the disengaged rotational position, and the first and second pincers **2132** and **2134** can separate to the fuselage-release orientation.

In certain embodiments, a safety rope, tether, wire, cable, or other flexible member is attached to the handle (or any other suitable component) of the safety mechanism to facilitate disengaging the safety mechanism. When the flexible safety member is tensioned (such as via an operator pulling on the flexible safety member), the safety mechanism rotates from the engaged rotational position to the disengaged rotational position, thereby disengaging the safety mechanism. The flexible safety member may be relatively long, which enables the operator to stand a safe distance away from the fixed-wing aircraft during the launch process and still be able to disengage the safety mechanism.

By intentionally commanding full multicopter thrust without releasing the safety mechanism, an operator may execute a "refuse takeoff" test, which is particularly useful for confirming full-power performance of the complete

electromechanical system without fear of flight-related mishap in the event that one or more components of the system should fail during the test.

2.2 Rotor Arm Module and Rear Landing Gear Module Storage Device

The rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** is shown in FIGS. **8H** and **8I**. The rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** is the element of the storage and launch system **2000** to which the rotor arm modules **400a** to **400d** and the rear landing gear modules **600c** and **600d** can be mounted and compactly stored. The rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** includes: (1) a base **2205**; (2) a handle **2210**; (3) an upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230**; (4) a lower rotor arm module constraining plate **2250**; and (5) a lock **2220** (which is a slide bolt in this embodiment but can be any suitable device).

The base **2205** defines a storage device lock engager receiving cavity **2205a** therethrough sized to receive the storage device lock engager **2112** of the launch-assist assembly **2100**. The lock **2220** is fixedly attached to the base **2205** near the storage device lock engager receiving cavity such that the lock **2220** can engage the storage device lock engager **2112** when the storage device lock engager **2112** is received in the storage device lock engager receiving cavity **2205a** to lock the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** to the launch assist assembly **2100**.

The handle **2210** includes two opposing, spaced-apart sides **2211** and **2213** and a top **2212** extending between the sides **2211** and **2213**. The sides **2211** and **2213** are attached to the base **2205**. The side **2211** includes two surfaces **2211a** and **2211b** each defining a rear landing gear module receiving cavity sized and shaped to receive a portion of one of the rear landing gear modules **600c** and **600d**.

The upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** is attached to the handle **2210**. The upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** includes a plurality of surfaces **2230a**, **2230b**, **2230c**, and **2230d** each defining a rotor motor receiving cavity sized and shaped to receive a rotor motor of one of the rotor arm modules.

The upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** also includes a plurality of rotor arm module retainers **2241**, **2242**, **2243**, and **2244** disposed within an enclosing bracket **2240**. The rotor arm module retainer **2241** includes a locking tab **2241a** extending below the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** and is pivotably connected to the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** via a pin **2241b**. The rotor arm module retainer **2242** includes a locking tab **2242a** extending below the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** and is pivotably connected to the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** via a pin **2242b**. The rotor arm module retainer **2243** includes a locking tab **2243a** extending below the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** and is pivotably connected to the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** via a pin **2243b**. The rotor arm module retainer **2244** includes a locking tab **2244a** extending below the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** and is pivotably connected to the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230** via a pin **2244b**.

The rotor arm module retainers are pivotable from a lock rotational position (shown in FIG. **8I**) to a release rotational position (not shown). Suitable biasing elements (such as compression spring, not shown) bias the rotor arm module retainers to the lock rotational position.

The lower rotor arm module constraining plate **2250** is attached to the handle **2210** below the upper rotor arm module constraining plate **2230**. The lower rotor arm module constraining plate **2250** includes a plurality of surfaces **2250a**, **2250b**, **2250c**, and **2250d** each defining a rotor motor receiving cavity sized and shaped to receive a rotor motor of one of the rotor arm modules.

2.3 Hub Module Storage Tray

The hub module storage tray **2300** is shown in FIG. **8J**. The hub module storage tray **2300** is the element of the storage and launch system **2000** to which the hub module **200** is mounted for storage. The hub module storage tray **2300** includes a generally rectangular base **2310**, a handle **2320** fixedly attached to the base **2310**, and four female blind mate connector engagers **2332**, **2334**, **2336**, and **2338** fixedly attached to the base **2310**. The female blind mate connector engagers are sized and shaped to engage the top surfaces of the female blind mate connectors **231** of the hub module **100**.

2.4 Storing the Multicopter in the Multicopter Storage Container

To store the multicopter **10** in the container of the storage and launch system **2000**, the operator first disassembles the multicopter **10** into the 13 modules or subassemblies, as described above. The operator moves the launch-assist assembly into its launch position.

The operator positions the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** atop the launch-assist assembly **2100** such that the storage device lock engager **2112** of the launch-assist assembly **2100** is received in the storage device lock engager receiving cavity **2205a**. The operator engages the storage device lock engager **2112** with the lock **2220** to lock the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** to the launch assist assembly **2100**.

The operator slides the rotor arm module **400a** into the space between the upper and lower rotor arm module constraining plates **2230** and **2250** of the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** until: (1) the lower rotor motor is disposed within the rotor motor receiving cavities defined by the surfaces **2230b** and **2250b**; and (2) the rotor arm module retainer **2243** locks the rotor arm module **400a** into place.

The operator slides the rotor arm module **400b** into the space between the upper and lower rotor arm module constraining plates **2230** and **2250** of the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** until: (1) the lower rotor motor is disposed within the rotor motor receiving cavities defined by the surfaces **2230d** and **2250d**; and (2) the rotor arm module retainer **2242** locks the rotor arm module **400b** into place.

The operator slides the rotor arm module **400c** into the space between the upper and lower rotor arm module constraining plates **2230** and **2250** of the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** until: (1) the upper rotor motor is disposed within the rotor motor receiving cavities defined by the surfaces **2230c** and **2250c**; and (2) the rotor arm module retainer **2241** locks the rotor arm module **400c** into place.

The operator slides the rotor arm module **400d** into the space between the upper and lower rotor arm module constraining plates **2230** and **2250** of the rotor arm module and rear landing gear module storage device **2200** until: (1) the upper rotor motor is disposed within the rotor motor receiving cavities defined by the surfaces **2230a** and **2250a**; and (2) the rotor arm module retainer **2244** locks the rotor arm module **400d** into place.

The operator inserts the front landing gear modules **600a** and **600b** into the first and second front landing gear module retainers **2110a** and **2110b** on the tray **2108** of the launch-assist assembly **2100**.

The operator inserts the rear landing gear module **600c** into the rear landing gear module receiving cavity defined by the surface **2211b** and the rear landing gear module **600d** into the rear landing gear module receiving cavity defined by the surface **2211a**.

The operator places the landing gear extensions **500a** to **500d** in the container bottom **2000a** behind the handle **2320** of the hub module storage tray **2300**. The operator attaches the container top **2000b** to the container bottom **2000a** to complete storage.

The operator inverts the hub module **100** and engages the female blind mate connector engagers **2332**, **2334**, **2336**, and **2338** of the hub module storage tray **2300** with the female blind mate connectors **231** of the hub module **100**.

The operator moves the launch-assist assembly **2100** to the storage position.

In certain embodiments, the container top or the container bottom includes one or more handles (such as an extendable handle) or one or more wheels to facilitate moving the container. In certain embodiments, the container top or the container bottom includes one or more locks configured to lock the container top to the container bottom.

3. Anchor System

The anchor system **3000** and components thereof is shown in FIGS. **9A-9H** and **10A-10D**. The anchor system **3000** is usable along with the multicopter **10**, the flexible capture member **5000** (described below), and the aircraft-landing structure **8000** (described below) to retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from free, wing-borne flight. Generally, the components of the anchor system **3000** operate together to impose a regulated force on the flexible capture member **5000** during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. This means that the anchor system **3000** is configured to regulate—i.e., maintain substantially constant—the tension in the flexible capture member **5000** while the multicopter **10** is station-keeping relative to the anchor system **3000** in preparation for retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. This simplifies multicopter operation during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process by eliminating the need for the multicopter operator to control the altitude of the multicopter **10** to maintain a desired tension in the flexible capture member **5000**.

The anchor system **3000** includes an anchor system base **3100**, a first mounting bracket **3200**, a second mounting bracket **3300**, a separator bracket **3400**, and a flexible capture member payout and retract system (not labeled). The flexible capture member payout and retract system includes a drum assembly **3500**, a level wind system **3600**, a transition assembly **3700**, and a hydraulic system **7300**.

3.1 Anchor System Base and Brackets

The anchor system base **3100** serves as a mount for certain other elements of the anchor system **3000**. As best shown in FIGS. **9A-9E**, the anchor system base **3100** includes two spaced-apart, generally parallel sides **3102** and **3104** and a top **3106** transverse (such as generally perpendicular) to, extending between, and connecting the sides **3102** and **3104**. As best shown in FIG. **9C**, the top **3106** includes a surface **3106a** that defines a GPS antenna mounting opening through the top **3106** and a surface **3106b** that defines a lower sealing and mounting component opening through the top **3106**. The GPS antenna **3800** is attached to a mounting bracket (not labeled) that extends between the sides **3102** and **3104** such that the GPS antenna **3800** extends

through the GPS antenna mounting opening of the top **3106**. As described below, a lower sealing and mounting component **8500** of the aircraft-landing structure **8000** is attachable to the top **3106** of the anchor system base **3100** via the lower sealing and mounting component mounting opening to attach the aircraft-landing structure **8000** to the anchor system base **3100**.

The first and second mounting brackets **3200** and **3300** serve as mounts for the drum assembly **3500** and part of the hydraulic system **7300**. As best shown in FIGS. **9D** and **9E**, the first and second mounting brackets **3200** and **3300** are generally planar and include respective cylindrical surfaces **3200a** and **3300a** that respectively define first and second mounting openings through the first and second mounting brackets **3200** and **3300**. The first mounting bracket **3200** is attached to the first side **3102** of the anchor system base **3100** via suitable fasteners (not shown), and the second mounting bracket **3300** is attached to the second side **3104** of the anchor system base **3100** via suitable fasteners (not shown). The separator bracket **3400** is attached to and extends between the first and second mounting brackets **3200** and **3300** via suitable fasteners (not shown) to maintain the spacing between these components.

3.2 Drum Assembly

The flexible capture member **5000** may be wound onto and off of the drum assembly **3500**. As best shown in FIG. **9G**, the drum assembly **3500** includes a drum **3510** having a cylindrical exterior surface **3510a** and a cylindrical interior surface **3510b**; a first drum flange **3512** having a circular exterior surface **3512a**, a circular interior surface **3512b**, a cylindrical perimeter surface **3512c**, and a cylindrical mounting surface **3512d** that defines a mounting opening through the first flange **3512**; a second drum flange **3514** having a circular exterior surface **3514a**, a circular interior surface **3514b**, a cylindrical perimeter surface **3514c**, and a cylindrical mounting surface **3514d** that defines a mounting opening through the second flange **3514**; a drum shaft **3520**; a coupler **3532** including a tubular coupler shaft **3532a** defining a shaft-receiving bore therethrough and a coupler flange **3532b** extending radially outwardly from the coupler shaft **3532a**; a first annular flange **3534**; a second annular flange **3536**; and a third annular flange **3537**.

The first and second drum flanges **3512** and **3514** are fixedly attached to opposing longitudinal ends (not labeled) of the drum **3510** via fasteners (not shown) such that the interior surface **3510b** of the drum **3510** and the interior surfaces **3512b** and **3514b** of the first and second drum flanges **3512** and **3514** define a cylindrical inner drum cavity (not labeled).

The coupler flange **3532b** and the first annular flange **3534** are fixedly attached to one another and to the first drum flange **3512** via fasteners (not shown) such that: (1) the coupler flange **3532b** contacts the exterior surface **3512a** of the first drum flange **3512**; (2) the first annular flange **3534** is within the inner drum cavity and contacts the interior surface **3512b** of the first drum flange **3512**; (3) the coupler flange **3532b** and the first annular flange **3534** sandwich part of the first drum flange **3512** therebetween; and (4) a first portion of the coupler shaft **3532a** is within the inner drum cavity while a second portion of the coupler shaft **3532a** is outside of the inner drum cavity.

The second annular flange **3536** and the third annular flange **3538** are fixedly attached to one another and to the second drum flange **3514** via fasteners (not shown) such that: (1) the third annular flange **3538** contacts the exterior surface **3514a** of the second drum flange **3514**; (2) the second annular flange **3536** is within the inner drum cavity

and contacts the interior surface **3514b** of the second drum flange **3514**; and (3) the second annular flange **3536** and the third annular flange **3538** sandwich part of the second drum flange **3514** therebetween.

The drum shaft **3520** extends across the inner drum cavity such that a first end **3520a** of the drum shaft **3520** is received in the shaft-receiving bore defined through the coupler shaft **3532a** and a second end **3520b** of the drum shaft **3520** is outside of the inner drum cavity. The drum shaft **3520** is coupled to the coupler **3532** in any suitable manner such that the drum shaft **3520** is substantially axially fixed (i.e., cannot substantially move axially) relative to the coupler **3532** and such that the drum shaft **3520** and the coupler **3532** rotate together about the longitudinal axis of the drum shaft **3520**. That is, the drum shaft **3520** and the coupler **3532** are coupled such that rotation of the drum shaft **3520** causes the coupler **3532** to rotate, and vice-versa. In this embodiment, this coupling is achieved via a fastener (not shown) threadably received by the coupler **3532** and the drum shaft **3520**. This fixedly attaches the coupler **3532** and the drum shaft **3520**. In other embodiments, the drum shaft is keyed to the coupler (or vice-versa) such that they rotate together. In other embodiments, retaining rings, pins, clips, or other elements axially fix the drum shaft relative to the coupler.

The drum shaft **3520** is mounted to the second mounting bracket **3300**. Specifically, the second end **3520b** of the drum shaft **3520** extends through the second mounting opening defined through the second mounting bracket **3300** and is received in a drum shaft flange bearing **3910** attached to the second mounting bracket **3300**. This enables the drum shaft **3520** to rotate about its longitudinal axis relative to the second mounting bracket **3300**. The drum shaft **3520** is mounted to the first mounting bracket **3200** via the below-described coupling of the coupler **3532** and a motor output shaft **7358a** of a hydraulic motor **7358** of the hydraulic system **7300**.

3.3 Level Wind System

The level wind system **3600** ensures that the flexible capture member **3600** is wound onto (and off of) the drum **3510** in a generally uniform manner. As best shown in FIG. **9F**, the level wind system **3600** includes a level wind shaft **3610**, a first traveler **3620**, a second traveler **3630**, a guide shaft **3640**, a first pulley **3650**, a second pulley **3660**, and a belt **3670**.

The first and second travelers **3620** and **3630** are slidably mounted to the level wind shaft **3610** in a spaced-apart fashion such that their respective guide elements (not shown) are received in channels (not labeled) defined in the exterior surface of the level wind shaft **3610** around its circumference. The arrangement and shape of these grooves define how far and how fast the first and second travelers **3620** and **3630** slide back and forth relative to the level wind shaft **3610** as the level wind shaft **3610** rotates. The first and second travelers **3620** and **3630** are also slidably mounted to the guide shaft **3640** to prevent the first and second travelers **3620** and **3630** from about the longitudinal axis of the level wind shaft **3610**.

The level wind shaft **3610** is mounted to the sides **3102** and **3104** of the anchor system base **3100**. More specifically, the ends of the level wind shaft **3610** are received in respective level wind shaft flange bearings (not labeled) attached to the sides **3102** and **3104** of the anchor system base **3100** such that the level wind shaft **3610** can rotate about its longitudinal axis relative to the sides **3102** and **3104** of the anchor system base **3100**. Similarly, the guide shaft **3400** is mounted to the sides **3102** and **3104** of the anchor system base **3100**. More specifically, the ends of the

guide shaft **3640** are received in respective guide shaft flange bearings (not labeled) attached to the sides **3102** and **3104** of the anchor system base **3100** such that the guide shaft **3640** can rotate about its longitudinal axis relative to the sides **3102** and **3104** of the anchor system base **3100**.

The first pulley **3650** is mounted to and coupled to the level wind shaft **3610** in any suitable manner such that the first pulley **3650** is substantially axially fixed (i.e., cannot substantially move axially) relative to the level wind shaft **3610** and such that the first pulley **3650** and the level wind shaft **3610** rotate together about the longitudinal axis of the level wind shaft **3610**. That is, the first pulley **3650** and the level wind shaft **3610** are coupled such that rotation of the first pulley **3650** causes the level wind shaft **3610** to rotate, and vice-versa. In this embodiment, this coupling is achieved via a fastener (not shown) threadably received by the first pulley **3650** and the level wind shaft **3610**. This fixedly attaches the first pulley **3650** to the level wind shaft **3610**. In other embodiments, the level wind shaft is keyed to the first pulley (or vice-versa) such that they rotate together. In other embodiments, retaining rings, pins, clips, or other elements axially fix the first pulley relative to the level wind shaft.

As best shown in FIG. **9G**, the second pulley **3660** is mounted to and coupled to the drum shaft **3520** in any suitable manner such that the second pulley **3660** is substantially axially fixed (i.e., cannot substantially move axially) relative to the drum shaft **3520** and such that the second pulley **3660** and the drum shaft **3520** rotate together about the longitudinal axis of the drum shaft **3520**. That is, the second pulley **3660** and the drum shaft **3520** are coupled such that rotation of the drum shaft **3520** causes the second pulley **3660** to rotate, and vice-versa. In this embodiment, this coupling is achieved via a fastener (not shown) threadably received by the second pulley **3660** and the drum shaft **3520**. This fixedly attaches the second pulley **3660** to the drum shaft **3520**. In other embodiments, the drum shaft is keyed to the second pulley (or vice-versa) such that they rotate together. In other embodiments, retaining rings, pins, clips, or other elements axially fix the second pulley relative to the drum shaft.

The belt **3670** fits around and operatively connects the first and second pulleys **3650** and **3660** such that rotation of one of the pulleys causes the other to rotate.

In operation, as the drum shaft **3520** of the drum assembly **3500** rotates, the second pulley **3660** rotates therewith. Rotation of the second pulley **3660** causes the first pulley **3650** to rotate due to their connection via the belt **3670**. Rotation of the first pulley **3650** causes the level wind shaft **3610** to rotate. Rotation of the level wind shaft **3610** causes the first and second travelers **3620** and **3630** to slide relative to the level wind shaft **3610** due to their guide elements being received in the grooves defined in the level wind shaft **3610**. This sliding of the first and second travelers **3620** and **3630** (which is keyed to rotation of the drum shaft **3520**) guides placement of the flexible capture member **5000** as it is wound onto (or off of) the drum **3510**.

3.3 Transition Assembly

The transition assembly **3700** is configured to route the flexible capture member **5000** from the aircraft-landing structure **8000** to the level wind system **3600**. As best shown in FIG. **9C**, the transition assembly **3700** includes a first transition assembly housing portion **3710**, a second transition assembly housing portion **3720**, a transition pulley **3730**, and a fastener **3740**. The first and second transition assembly housing portions **3710** and **3720** are attachable to one another via the fastener **3740**, and together define a

transition pulley cavity and a flexible capture member receiving bore in fluid communication with the transition pulley cavity. The transition pulley **3730** is rotatably mounted on a spindle (not labeled) within the transition pulley cavity such that the transition pulley **3730** can rotate relative to the first and second transition assembly housing portions **3710** and **3720**. As described in detail below, the transition assembly **3700** is attachable to the lower sealing and mounting component **8500**, which in turn is slidably receivable on the anchor system base **3100**.

3.4 Hydraulic System

The hydraulic system **7300** is configured to regulate the tension in the flexible capture member **5000** during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. As best shown in FIGS. **10A-10D**, the hydraulic system **7300** includes an electric hydraulic pump **7350** (such as one of the PU-Series Hydraulic Economy Electric Pumps sold by Enerpac) having an inlet port and an outlet port, an accumulator **7352** (such as the Piston-Style Hydraulic Accumulator #6716K51 sold by McMaster-Carr) having an inlet/outlet port, a pressure relief valve **7356** (such as the Adjustable Stainless Steel Relief Valve #5027K11 sold by McMaster-Carr) having an inlet port and an outlet port, the hydraulic motor **7358** (such as the Pilot Flange Mount J Series Hydraulic Motor #5PZL3 sold by Grainger) having an inlet port and an outlet port, a hydraulic fluid tank **7362** (such as that included in one of the PU-Series Hydraulic Economy Electric Pumps sold by Enerpac) having an inlet port and an outlet port, and a pressure switch **7364** (such as the Extended-Life Pressure Switch #4735K46 sold by McMaster-Carr).

The hydraulic motor **7358** is attached to the first mounting bracket **3200** such that the motor output shaft **7358a** extends through the first mounting opening defined through the first mounting bracket **3200** and is received in the shaft-receiving bore defined through the coupler shaft **3532a** of the coupler **3532**. The motor output shaft **7358a** is coupled to the coupler **3532** in any suitable manner such that the motor output shaft **7358a** and the coupler **3532** rotate together. That is, the motor output shaft **7358a** and the coupler **3532** are coupled such that rotation of the motor output shaft **7358a** causes the coupler **3532** to rotate, and vice-versa. In this embodiment, the motor output shaft **7358a** is keyed to the coupler **3532**.

The remaining components of the hydraulic system **7300** are attached to each other; the container housing the anchor system **3000**; and/or the anchor base **3100**, the first mounting bracket **3200**, or the second mounting bracket **3300**.

The inlet port of the electric hydraulic pump **7350** is in fluid communication with the outlet port of the tank **7362**, and the outlet port of the electric hydraulic pump **7350** is in fluid communication with the inlet/outlet port of the accumulator **7352**, the inlet port of the pressure relief valve **7356**, and the inlet port of the hydraulic motor **7358**. The inlet port of the hydraulic motor **7358** is in fluid communication with the inlet port of the pressure relief valve **7356**. The outlet port of the hydraulic motor **7358** is in fluid communication with the outlet port of the pressure relief valve **7356** and the inlet port of the tank **7362**. In this embodiment, these components are in fluid communication with one another via suitable flexible or rigid tubing (not shown), though any suitable lines, hoses, or tubing may be used to fluidically connect these components. The hydraulic system **7300** also includes various fittings and connectors (not shown) that facilitate fluidically connecting these components. These fittings and connectors are well-known in the art and are not described herein for brevity.

When electrically connected to a power source and powered on, the electric hydraulic pump **7350** draws hydraulic

fluid (such as oil or any other suitable fluid) from the tank **7362** and through its inlet port and pumps the hydraulic fluid out of its outlet port at a pump outlet pressure (800 psi in this example embodiment).

In certain situations, as explained below, the accumulator **7352** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet/outlet and stores hydraulic fluid at a particular pressure to reduce pressure switch chatter (as described below). The accumulator gas charge is preloaded to the pressure switch lower set point (650 psi in this example embodiment, as described below) to minimize pressure switch chatter frequency.

The pressure switch is configured to measure the pressure of hydraulic fluid at the accumulator **7352**. The pressure switch **7364** selectively connects the electric hydraulic pump **7350** to a power source **7400** based on the pressure **P1** of hydraulic fluid at the accumulator **7352**. The pressure switch measures **P1** and: (1) electrically connects the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350** when **P1** is less than a pressure switch lower set point (650 psi in this example embodiment); and (2) electrically disconnects the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350** when **P1** is greater than or equal to a pressure switch upper set point (800 psi in this example embodiment). The combination of the accumulator **7352** and the pressure switch **7364** ensures that the electric hydraulic pump **7350** only operates as needed to maintain the pressure of the hydraulic fluid in the accumulator **7352**.

The pressure relief valve **7356** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet port and prevents the hydraulic fluid from exiting its outlet port until the pressure of the hydraulic fluid reaches a pressure relief valve set point (850 psi in this example embodiment). In other words, the pressure relief valve **7356** is movable between a closed configuration in which the pressure relief valve **7356** prevents the hydraulic fluid from flowing from its inlet port to its outlet port and an open configuration in which the pressure relief valve **7356** enables the hydraulic fluid to flow from its inlet port to its outlet port. The pressure relief valve **7356** is biased to the closed configuration, and moves to the open configuration when the pressure of the hydraulic fluid reaches the pressure relief valve set point.

Depending on the scenario, the hydraulic motor **7358** receives hydraulic fluid at either its inlet port from the electric hydraulic pump **7350** or its outlet port from the pressure relief valve **7356**. When the hydraulic motor **7358** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet port from the electric hydraulic pump **7350**, the hydraulic fluid flows through the hydraulic motor **7358** and exits its outlet port. The flow of the hydraulic fluid in this direction causes the output shaft of the hydraulic motor **7358** to rotate in a direction that, as described below, causes the flexible capture member to wrap around the drum **3510**. On the other hand, when excessive force on the flexible capture member **5000** forces the drum **3510** to rotate in a manner that enables flexible capture member payout, the hydraulic motor **7358** receives hydraulic fluid at its outlet port from the pressure relief valve **7356**, and the hydraulic fluid flows through the hydraulic motor **7358** and exits its inlet port. The flow of the hydraulic fluid in this direction is intentionally lossy, forming an energy sink for the kinetic energy of the aircraft being captured.

3.4.1 Flexible Capture Member Haul-in Phase

FIG. **10A** is a schematic block diagram of part of the hydraulic system **7300** during the flexible capture member haul-in phase (sometimes called the “haul-in phase” for brevity) of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The haul-in phase is defined for the purposes of this section as occurring when the force F_{DRUM} the drum **3510** imposes on

the flexible capture member (via the torque the hydraulic motor 7358 exerts on the coupler 3532) exceeds any force $F_{OPPOSING}$ imposed on the flexible capture member 5000 that opposes F_{DRUM} (such as when the flexible capture member is slack below a recently captured fixed-wing aircraft or when the multicopter is descending following capture of the fixed-wing aircraft).

During the haul-in phase, the pressure P1 of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator 7352 is or falls below the 650 psi pressure switch lower set point. Accordingly, the pressure switch 7364 electrically connects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to the power source 7400. The electric hydraulic pump 7350 draws hydraulic fluid from the tank 7362 and pumps the hydraulic fluid at the pump outlet pressure to the inlet/outlet port of the hydraulic accumulator 7352, the inlet port of the pressure relief valve 7356, and the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358.

Since at this point the pressure P1 of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator 7352 is less than the 800 psi pressure switch upper set point, the pressure switch 7364 continues electrically connecting the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to the power source 7400 throughout the haul-in phase.

Since the pressure P1 at the accumulator 7352 is less than the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point, the pressure relief valve 7356 prevents the hydraulic fluid from flowing through it.

The hydraulic fluid instead flows through the hydraulic motor 7358 and exits the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358. The flow of the hydraulic fluid through the hydraulic motor 7358 in this direction (i.e., from inlet port to outlet port) causes the output shaft of the hydraulic motor 7358 to exert a counter-clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 10A) torque on the coupler 3532, which transmits that torque to the drum shaft 3520, which transmits that torque to the drum flanges 3512 and 3514, which transmits that torque to the drum 3510. This torque imposes a force F_{DRUM} on the flexible capture member 5000 via the drum 3510. Since the force $F_{OPPOSING}$ on the flexible capture member 5000 is less than F_{DRUM} , the torque the hydraulic motor 7358 exerts on the coupler 3532 causes the drum 3510 to rotate counter-clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 10A) relative to the anchor system base 3100. This causes the flexible capture member 5000 to wrap around the drum 3510 (and decrease the amount of flexible capture member 5000 extending between the drum 3510 and the multicopter 10)).

The hydraulic fluid flows from the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358 to the inlet port of the tank 7362.

In this example embodiment, the components and set points are sized, shaped, arranged, set, or otherwise configured such that F_{DRUM} is about 80 pounds during the haul-in phase.

3.4.2 Neutral Phase

FIGS. 10B and 10C are schematic block diagrams of part of the hydraulic system 7300 during the flexible capture member neutral phase (sometimes referred to as the “neutral phase” for brevity) of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The neutral phase is defined for the purposes of this section as occurring when the force F_{DRUM} the drum 3510 imposes on the flexible capture member (via the torque the hydraulic motor 7358 exerts on the coupler 3532) equals a force $F_{OPPOSING}$ imposed on the flexible capture member 5000 that opposes F_{DRUM} (such as when the multicopter is station-keeping above the anchor system in preparation for fixed-wing aircraft retrieval).

During the neutral phase, the drum 3510 does not rotate relative to the anchor system base 3100. Even so, hydraulic fluid leaks through the hydraulic motor 7358 and drains into

the tank 7362. The accumulator 7352 eliminates the need to constantly run the electric hydraulic pump 7350 during the neutral phase in response to this leakage and ensure F_{DRUM} remains constant to regulate the tension in the flexible capture member 5000.

As shown in FIG. 10B, once $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} , the electric hydraulic pump 7350 continues to operate because P1 is less than the 650 psi pressure switch lower set point. But since hydraulic fluid flow through the hydraulic rotor 7358 has been reduced to mere leakage, pressure P1 begins to build and the accumulator 7352 begins charging. As shown in FIG. 10C, once the pressure P1 reaches the 800 psi pressure switch upper set point, the accumulator 7352 is charged and the pressure switch 7364 electrically disconnects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 from the power source 7400. The accumulator 7352 begins discharging to replenish the hydraulic fluid leaking through the hydraulic motor 7358. Once the pressure P1 falls below the 650 psi pressure switch lower set point, the pressure switch 7364 electrically connects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to the power source 7400 to again charge the accumulator 7352. The use of the accumulator 7352 and the pressure switch 7364 therefore ensures that leakage through the hydraulic motor 7358 is accounted for and that F_{DRUM} will not decrease as hydraulic fluid leaks through the hydraulic motor 7358.

In this example embodiment, the components and set points are sized, shaped, arranged, set, or otherwise configured such that F_{DRUM} is about 80 pounds during the neutral phase.

3.4.3 Flexible Capture Member Payout Phase

FIG. 10D is a schematic block diagram of part of the hydraulic system 7300 during the flexible capture member payout phase (sometimes referred to as the “payout phase” for brevity) of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The payout phase is defined for the purposes of this section as occurring when the force F_{DRUM} the drum 3510 imposes on the flexible capture member (via the torque the hydraulic motor 7358 exerts on the coupler 3532) is less than a force $F_{OPPOSING}$ imposed on the flexible capture member 5000 that opposes F_{DRUM} (such as when the multicopter is climbing to prepare for fixed-wing aircraft retrieval or just after the fixed-wing aircraft captures and begins to deflect the flexible capture member).

During the payout phase, $F_{OPPOSING}$ causes the drum 3510 to spin clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 10D) and pay out flexible capture member 5000 wrapped around the drum 3510 (and increase the amount of flexible capture member 5000 extending between the drum 3510 and the multicopter 10). This clockwise spinning of the drum 3510 forces hydraulic fluid to flow into the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358, through the hydraulic motor 7358, and exit the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358. Since hydraulic fluid cannot enter the outlet port of the electric hydraulic pump 7350, this causes the pressure P1 of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator 7352 to increase. Once the pressure P1 reaches the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point, the pressure relief valve 7356 enables hydraulic fluid to flow through it. This causes hydraulic fluid to flow from the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358 to the inlet port of the pressure relief valve 7356 and from the outlet port of the pressure relief valve 7356 to the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358 until the drum 3510 stops rotating clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 10D) and P1 drops below the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point.

During the payout phase, hydraulic fluid does not necessarily drain to the tank 7362, and the electric hydraulic pump

7350 thus doesn't need to replenish any drained hydraulic fluid. This means that P1 will not drop below the 650 psi pressure switch lower set point, and the pressure switch 7364 electrically disconnects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 from the power source 7400 during most (if not all) of the payout phase.

Accordingly, the relative positioning and configuration of the components of the hydraulic system enable the hydraulic motor to spin in either direction while maintaining torque on the drum shaft in the desired direction (counter-clockwise in the embodiment show in FIGS. 10A-10D) to maintain F_{DRUM} on the flexible capture member

In this example embodiment, F_{DRUM} is controlled by the pressure relief valve set point (the higher the set point, the higher F_{DRUM}) and friction. In this example embodiment, F_{DRUM} is about 85 pounds during the payout phase (i.e., greater than F_{DRUM} in the haul-in and neutral phases)

4. Aircraft-Landing Structure

Controlling the multicopter 10 post-capture to lower the fixed-wing aircraft 20a to the ground (or another non-compliant structure) risks damaging the fixed-wing aircraft 20a. For instance, the multicopter 10 could descend too quickly or stall while descending and drop, causing the fixed-wing aircraft 20a to impact the ground at high speed. Even a slow and well-controlled descent of the multicopter 10 could coincide with poorly timed pendulum swing of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a, resulting in damage when the fixed-wing aircraft 20a touches down on the surface.

In certain situations, a compliant aircraft-landing structure 8000 is employed to gently receive the fixed-wing aircraft 20a post-capture and hold it in place above the ground (or other non-compliant surface) in a generally secure manner to facilitate retrieval at a later point. The use of this compliant aircraft-landing structure 8000 minimizes potential impact damage to the fixed-wing aircraft 20a and enables the multicopter 10 to land the fixed-wing aircraft 20a on the aircraft-landing structure 8000 and then land itself a safe distance away.

FIGS. 11A-11M illustrate one example embodiment of the aircraft-landing structure 8000 and its components, which include: an inflatable aircraft-supporting body 8100; multiple gussets 8105; a tubular spacer guide 8110; spaced-apart cylindrical inflatable supports 8200a, 8200b, 8200c, and 8200d; a guiding assembly 8300 including a spacer 8310 and an upper guiding component 8400 and an intermediate guiding component 8500 attached to the spacer 8310; an inflation device 8600; a deflation device 8700; and a lower guiding and mounting component 8800.

The aircraft-supporting body 8100 is formed from one or more pieces of fabric material (such as nylon, polyester, dacron, vinyl, or other composite laminate sheets) that are stitched, adhered, or otherwise fastened together in an airtight manner to generally form a frustoconical shape when inflated. The gussets 8105 and the tubular spacer guide 8110 are made of similar material. As best shown in FIGS. 11E-11G, the tubular spacer guide 8110 is attached to the aircraft-supporting body 8100 in a suitable manner (such as via stitching or adhesive) near its top and extends from there into the interior of the aircraft-supporting body 8100. The gussets 8105 are attached to and extend radially between the spacer guide 8110 and an inner surface 8100a of the aircraft-supporting body 8100. These gussets 8105 and the spacer guide 8110 assist in maintaining the guiding assembly 8300 upright when the aircraft-supporting body 8100 is inflated.

Each support 8200a-8200d is formed from one or more pieces of material (such as any of those listed above) that are stitched, adhered, or otherwise fastened together in an

airtight manner to generally form cylinders when inflated. The supports are attached to the underside of the aircraft-supporting body 8100 via stitching, adhesive, or any other suitable manner. The interiors of the supports 8200a-8200d are in fluid communication with the interior of the aircraft-supporting body 8100 to enable fluid (e.g., air) to flow among these components. This enables the aircraft-supporting body 8100 and the supports 8200a-8200d to be inflated via a single inflator attached to the inflation device 8600. The supports 8200a-8200d have dumbbells 8205a-8205d respectively attached thereto. The dumbbells 8205a-8205d add weight to the supports 8200a-8200d to help maintain the aircraft-landing structure 8000 upright as the fixed-wing aircraft 20a contacts the flexible capture member 5000, as described below. The dumbbells may be replaced with any suitable components that add weight to the supports. In one embodiment, the supports are partially filled with material, such as sand, to weigh them down. In other embodiments, stakes are used to anchor the supports to the ground instead of or in addition to weighted elements.

As best shown in FIGS. 11E-11G, the spacer 8310 of the guiding assembly 8300 extends through the spacer guide 8110 such that a first end 8310a of the spacer 8310 is external to the aircraft-supporting body 8100 and an opposing second end 8310b of the spacer 8310 is inside of the interior of the aircraft-supporting body 8100. Hose clamps (not labeled) or any other suitable devices clamp the upper portion 8100a of the aircraft-supporting body 8100 and the spacer guide 8110 to the exterior cylindrical surface 8310c of the spacer 8310 to attach these components to one another. The spacer 8310 includes a cylindrical interior surface 8310d that defines a flexible capture member receiving bore. The upper guiding component 8400 is attached to the first end 8310a of the spacer 8310 via suitable fasteners, and the intermediate guiding component 8500 is attached to the second end 8310b of the spacer 8310 via suitable fasteners.

As best shown in FIGS. 11H and 11I, the upper guiding component 8400 includes a tubular body 8410, a tubular mounting element 8420, lower and upper roller bearings 8430a and 8430b, a retaining element 8440, a needle bearing supporter 8450, and multiple needle bearings 8460.

The body 8410 defines a cylindrical interior surface 8412 that forms a flexible capture member receiving bore there-through. The mounting element 8420 surrounds part of the body 8410. The upper roller bearing 8430b surrounds part of the body 8410 and is positioned between an upper surface (not labeled) of the mounting element 8420 and a lip (not labeled) of the body 8410. The lower roller bearing 8430a surrounds part of the body 8410 and is positioned between a lower surface (not labeled) of the mounting element 8420 and the retaining element 8440, which is disposed within a channel defined around the circumference of the body 8410. The retaining element 8440 retains the body 8410, the mounting element 8420, and the roller bearings 8430a and 8430b in place relative to one another. The needle bearing supporter 8450 is attached to the body 8410 via fasteners, and the needle bearings 8460 are rotatably attached to the needle bearing supporter 8450 such that they can rotate relative to the needle bearing supporter 8450.

The mounting element 8420 of the upper guiding component 8400 is fixedly attached to the first end 8310a of the spacer 8310 of the guiding assembly 8300 via one or more fasteners. After attachment, the roller bearings 8430a and 8430b enable the body 8410 and the attached needle bearing supporter 8450 and needle bearings 8460 to rotate together

about the longitudinal axis of the body **8410** relative to the mounting element **8430** and the guiding assembly **8300**.

As best shown in FIGS. **11J** and **11K**, the intermediate guiding component **8500** includes a body **8510** having an inner surface **8512**. Moving from top to bottom in FIG. **11K**, the inner surface **8512** tapers radially inwardly into a cylindrical shape and then tapers back radially outwardly. The inner surface **8512** defines a flexible capture member receiving bore. The body **8510** is fixedly attached to the second end **8310b** of the spacer **8310** of the guiding assembly **8300** via one or more fasteners.

As best shown in FIGS. **11L** and **11M**, the lower guiding and mounting component **8800** includes a transition assembly receiving component **8810** connected to an anchor system base mounting component **8830**. The transition assembly receiving component **8810** is generally cylindrical and includes an exterior cylindrical aircraft-landing structure attachment surface **8813** and interior cylindrical surfaces **8814** and **8818**. An annular lip **8816** that extends radially outwardly from the cylindrical surface **8818** separates the interior cylindrical surfaces **8814** and **8818**. The interior cylindrical surface **8814** defines a flexible capture member receiving bore, and the interior cylindrical surface **8818** defines a transition assembly receiving bore.

The anchor system base mounting component **8830** includes an upper portion **8832** and a lower portion **8834** spaced apart by a middle portion **8836**. The middle portion **8836** is partially recessed radially inward relative to the upper and lower portions **8832** and **8834**. This defines an anchor system base receiving channel (not labeled). As best shown in FIG. **11E**, hose clamps (not labeled) clamp a lower portion (not labeled) of the aircraft-supporting body **8100** to the aircraft-landing structure attachment surface **8813** of the transition assembly receiving component **8810** to attach these components to one another. The transition assembly receiving bore receives part of the transition assembly **3700** in the transition assembly receiving bore, and a fastener is used to attach the transition assembly **3700** to the transition assembly receiving bore. Once attached, the flexible capture member receiving bore of the lower guiding and mounting component **8800** is in fluid communication with the flexible capture member receiving bore of the transition assembly **3700**. The lower guiding and mounting component **8800** is attached to the anchor system base **3100** via the anchor system base receiving channel. That is, the anchor system base **3100** slidably receives the lower guiding and mounting component **8800**. A fastener may be used to further secure these elements together.

As best shown in FIG. **11D**, the inflation device **8600** is attached to (such as via stitching, adhesive, or in any other suitable manner) and extends downward from the underside of the aircraft-supporting body **8100**. The inflation device **8600** is in fluid communication with the interior of the aircraft-supporting body **8100** (which is in fluid communication with the interiors of the supports **8200a-8200d**). The inflation device **8600** is sized, positioned, and otherwise configured to be attached to a suitable inflator (such as via a hose clamp or any other suitable manner of attachment) to enable inflation of the aircraft-supporting body **8100** and the supports **8200** and **8300** as described below.

As best shown in FIG. **11D**, the deflation device **8700** is located on the underside of the aircraft-supporting body **8100**. The deflation device **8700** includes a deflation element, such as a removable cap or a valve, that is switchable between a deflation configuration in which the deflation element enables air to flow out of the aircraft-supporting body **8100** and a sealed configuration in which the deflation

element does not enable air to flow out of the aircraft-supporting body **8100**. The deflation device **8700** enables an operator to quickly deflate the aircraft-supporting body **8100** and the supports **8200a-8200d** with minimal effort, such as by removing a cap or opening a valve.

In another embodiment, the aircraft-landing structure does not include the intermediate guiding element. In this embodiment, the upper guiding element and the lower guiding and mounting element are attached to opposing ends of the spacer such that the spacer extends between the upper guiding element and the lower guiding and mounting element.

In another embodiment, the anchor system base threadably receives the lower guiding and mounting component.

In other embodiments, the aircraft-supporting body includes stabilizing ribs extending along its tapered walls. In further embodiments, the bottom of the aircraft-supporting body is stiff in bending.

In another embodiment, a plurality of tension members are attached to and extend between the interior of the aircraft-supporting body and the outer surface of the flexible capture member receiving tube. These tension members help support the weight/tension of the flexible capture member receiving tube and help maintain the apex of the aircraft-landing structure erect.

In certain embodiments, tie-downs (such as ropes, bungees, and the like) may be used to secure the aircraft-landing structure to the ground or to a suitable base structure, such as the above-described aircraft system base.

In other embodiments, the aircraft-supporting body is formed from compliant rods rather than inflatable tubes.

5. Flexible Capture Member

As best shown in FIGS. **12D-12G**, the flexible capture member **5000** is attachable to the multicopter **10** and the anchor system **3000** and threadable through the aircraft-landing structure **8000** to facilitate retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from free, wing-borne flight. The flexible capture member may be a rope (such as a Spectra rope) or other similar element.

In some embodiments, the flexible capture member includes an elastic portion, such as a bungee or similar element, at the end attachable to the multicopter. The elastic portion may be rigged such that a portion of the strain energy is directed into a damping element such as a metal ring or a one-way pulley. By rigging the elastic portion as a compliant damper (as opposed to a spring), more energy is absorbed during capture, and undesirable ricochet is minimized.

In some embodiments, the flexible capture member includes a capture portion that is thicker near its ends (such as within 12 feet of each end) that it is in its center. In one embodiment, both ends of the capture portion terminate in a Brummel eye splice in which the buried tails constitute the thicker portion of the capture portion.

In some embodiments in which the flexible capture member includes a rope, the flexible capture member includes an elastic member inside the core of the rope. The elastic member shortens the rope as it slackens and is wound onto the drum. During payout, the elastic member allows the rope to lengthen as it leaves the drum, and a lossy payout device is formed.

6. Accessories Container and Other Components

As best shown in FIG. **9H**, the anchor system **3000** is attached to the container bottom **4000a** of an anchor system and accessory storage container to enable easy and compact storage of the anchor system **3000** and various accessories, such as (but not limited to): a generator; the flexible capture member **5000**; an R/C transmitter stand that helps enforce

geo-referenced joystick commands of the R/C controller; a fire extinguisher; shovels; hard hats. Further, certain components of the hydraulic system 7300 are attached to the container bottom 4000a.

7. Methods of Operation

As described in detail below: (1) the multicopter 10 and the storage and launch system 2000 are usable to facilitate launch of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a into free, wing-borne flight; and (2) the multicopter 10, the anchor system 3000, the flexible capture member 5000, and the aircraft-landing structure 8000 are usable to facilitate retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from free, wing-borne flight.

7.1 Multicopter-Assisted Fixed-Wing Aircraft Launch Method

The multicopter-assisted fixed-wing aircraft launch method begins with the multicopter 10 disassembled and stored in the storage and launch system 2000, as best shown in FIG. 8A. The multicopter operator unpacks the 13 modules and moves the launch-assist assembly 2100 of the storage and launch system 2000 to its launch position, as best shown in FIG. 8C.

The multicopter operator (or the fixed-wing aircraft operator) mounts the fixed-wing aircraft 20a to the launch-assist assembly 2100 by: (1) disengaging the safety mechanism 2150 of the fuselage-retaining assembly 2130, which enables the pincers 2132 and 2134 to separate from the fuselage-retaining orientation to the fuselage-release orientation; (2) lowering the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a between the pincers 2132 and 2134 (the fact that the safety mechanism 2150 is disengaged enables weight of the fixed-wing aircraft to force the pincers 2132 and 2134 to separate to receive the fuselage); (3) positioning the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a on the wing engaging surfaces 2121a and 2123a of the aircraft engaging bracket 2120 of the launch-assist assembly 2100; and (4) engaging the safety mechanism 2150, which prevents the pincers 2132 and 2134 from separating to the fuselage-release position and retains the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a between the pincers 2132 and 2134. FIG. 8D shows the fixed-wing aircraft 20a mounted to the launch-assist assembly 2100 in this manner.

The multicopter operator (or the fixed-wing aircraft operator) selects the appropriate cooling nozzle for the engine cooling system for the fixed-wing aircraft 20a. The multicopter operator attaches that cooling nozzle to the engine cooling system and hangs the engine cooling system on the back of the aircraft engaging bracket 2120 of the launch-assist assembly 2100 such that the engine of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a is in the cooling nozzle's path.

The multicopter operator switches on an idle power circuit of the multicopter 10 to perform various preflight checks, such as operating mode status checks, throttle response checks, attitude indicator response checks, heading accuracy checks, R/C range checks, and the like. Switching on the idle power circuit does not power the rotor motors. The idle power circuit thus enables the multicopter operator to conduct most preflight checks without having to worry about accidentally switching on one or more of the rotor motors.

The multicopter operator then attaches the hub module 100 to the fixed-wing aircraft 20a by: (1) operating the cam servo motor 381 (either manually or remotely via the R/C controller) to rotate the cam 350 to the attached rotational position (clockwise from this viewpoint); (2) operating the lock servo motor 391 (either manually or remotely via the R/C controller) to rotate the lock servo arm 392 into the cam rotation-preventing rotational position (clockwise from this

viewpoint) such that the lock servo motor locking extension 392a on the end of the lock servo arm 392 engages the cam servo motor arm lock device 382a of the cam servo motor arm 382; and (3) seating a rearwardly curved hook 21 attached to the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a on the cam 350 such that hook generally rests on the ridge 351 of the cam 350 and the tip of the hook is disposed in the valley 353 of the cam 350. FIG. 12A shows the hub module 100 attached to the fixed-wing aircraft 20a.

At this point the fixed-wing aircraft 20a is attached to the cam 350 (and the hub base 100), the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a contacts the front and rear aircraft engaging brackets 340a and 340b (to prevent rotation about the pitch and yaw axes of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a), and the stabilizers 290a and 290b contact the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a (to prevent rotation about the roll axis of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a).

Since the lock servo motor locking extension 392a is engaged to the cam servo motor arm lock device 382a of the cam servo motor arm 382, the cam servo motor 381 cannot rotate the cam 350 from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position (counter-clockwise from this viewpoint). This prevents undesired release of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from the cam 350 (and thus the multicopter 10).

After the hub module 100 is attached to the fixed-wing aircraft 20a, the multicopter operator: (1) attaches the front and rear landing gear modules 600a to 600d to their respective front and rear landing gear extension modules 500a to 500d; (2) attaches the front and rear landing gear extension modules 500a to 500d to their respective rotor arm modules 400a to 400d; and (3) attaches and locks the rotor arm modules 400a to 400d to the hub module 100 to complete assembly of the multicopter 10.

The multicopter operator ensures the front and rear landing gear modules 600a to 600d are not in the path of rotation of the rotors of their corresponding rotor arm modules 400a to 400b, and connects the main power line of the multicopter 10. Unlike the idle power circuit, the main power lines are capable of delivering current sufficient to drive the rotor motors and cause the multicopter 10 to fly.

The multicopter operator begins the engine start-up procedure for the fixed-wing aircraft 20a. The multicopter operator selects the ALTHOLD flight mode for the multicopter 10. The multicopter operator (or an assistant) disengages the safety mechanism 2150 of the fuselage-retaining assembly 2130, which enables the pincers 2132 and 2134 to separate from the fuselage-retaining orientation to the fuselage-release orientation.

The multicopter operator advances the throttle to begin vertically climbing and lift the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from between the pincers 2132 and 2134 (which are free to separate and release the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a since the safety mechanism 2150 is disengaged). Once the multicopter 10 and attached fixed-wing aircraft 20a have reached a designated altitude, the multicopter operator controls the multicopter 10 to begin dashing forward. At this point, if the airspeed, GPS reception, and pitch angle of the fixed-wing aircraft 20a is within a suitable range (e.g., 10 to 20 degrees), the multicopter 10 can release the fixed-wing aircraft 20a.

Releasing the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from the cam 350 (and the multicopter 10) is a two-step process, as shown in FIGS. 12B and 12C. To release the fixed-wing aircraft 20a from the cam 350 (and thus the multicopter 10), the multicopter operator first remotely controls the lock servo motor 391 (via the R/C controller) to rotate the lock servo arm 392

into the cam rotation-enabling rotational position (counter-clockwise from this viewpoint). Second, the multicopter operator remotely controls the cam servo motor **381** (via the R/C controller) to rotate the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position (counter-clockwise from this viewpoint). As shown in the progression from FIG. **12B** to FIG. **12C**, as the cam servo motor **381** rotates the cam **350** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position, the valley **352** and the ascending edge of the ridge **353** forces the hook **21** off of the cam **350**, thereby releasing the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from the cam **350** (and the multicopter **10**).

After release, the multicopter operator may switch the multicopter **10** to half-power mode and recover the multicopter **10** either manually via ALTHOLD and/or LOITER flight modes or semi-autonomously via RTL flight mode.

7.2 Multicopter-Assisted Fixed-Wing Aircraft Retrieval Method

FIGS. **12D-12G** diagrammatically show retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from free, wing-borne flight via use of the multicopter **10**, the anchor system **3000**, the flexible capture member **5000**, and the aircraft-landing structure **8000**. FIG. **12H** is a graph **7900** of the pressure **P1** of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator **7352** of the hydraulic system **7300** over time during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. For simplicity, in this example embodiment **P1** is assumed to be 0 psi at time **T0**.

To retrieve the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from free, wing-borne flight, the anchor system operator positions the anchor system **3000** at a retrieval location. Before time **T0**, while the electric hydraulic pump **7350** is switched off, the anchor system operator pulls some of the flexible capture member **5000** off of the drum **3510** and feeds it through the level wind system **3600** and around the transition pulley **3730** of the transition assembly **3700**. From there, the anchor system operator feeds the flexible capture member **5000** through the flexible capture member receiving bores of the transition assembly **3700**, the lower guiding and mounting component **8800**, the intermediate guiding component **8500**, and the upper guiding component **8400** such that the free end of the flexible capture member **5000** exits the upper guiding component **8400**. The anchor system operator then attaches the free end of the flexible capture member **5000** to the hub module **100** of the multicopter **10** in a suitable manner. Since the flexible capture member **5000** is slack between the drum **3510** and the multicopter **10**, $F_{OPPOSING}$ is negligible at time **T0**. The anchor system operator activates a blower (not shown) to inflate the aircraft-landing structure **8000**.

At time **T0**, the anchor system operator switches the electric hydraulic pump **7350** on to begin a haul-in phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process to take up the slack in the flexible capture member **5000**. Since **P1** is 0 psi—i.e., less than the 650 psi pressure switch lower set point—the pressure switch **7364** electrically connects the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350**. As described above, the electric hydraulic pump **7350** pumps hydraulic fluid at the 800 psi pump outlet pressure to drive the hydraulic motor **7358** to rotate the drum **3510** counter-clockwise (from the viewpoint in FIG. **10A**) and take up the slack in the flexible capture member **5000**.

At time **T1**, all of the slack in the flexible capture member **5000** has wound around the drum **3510**, and $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} . This begins a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process before multicopter climb. Flow through the hydraulic motor **7358** slows to mere leakage, and electric hydraulic pump **7350** begins charging the accumulator **7352**. Once **P1** reaches the 800 psi pressure switch

upper set point, the pressure switch **7364** electrically disconnects the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350**. The accumulator **7352** begins discharging in response to for the hydraulic fluid leaking through the hydraulic motor **7358**. The pressure switch **7364** continues alternating between electrically connecting and electrically disconnecting the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350** during the neutral phase so **P1** alternates between 650 and 800 psi.

At time **T2**, the multicopter operator begins controlling the multicopter **10** to ascend to a retrieval position above the anchor system **3000**. This begins a payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The climbing multicopter **10** exerts a force $F_{OPPOSING}$ on the flexible capture member **5000** that exceeds F_{DRUM} , which causes the drum **3510** to spin clockwise (from the viewpoint in FIG. **10D**) and payout the flexible capture member **5000**. As described above, this increases **P1** to (or even above) the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point. Once the multicopter **10** reaches its desired height (just before time **T3**), the multicopter operator controls the multicopter **10** to stop climbing and begin station-keeping relative to the anchor system **3000**. Since $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} , **P1** decreases to 800 psi.

At time **T3**, as shown in FIG. **12D**, the multicopter operator controls the multicopter **10** to station-keep relative to the anchor system **3000**, at which point $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} . This begins a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process, described above with respect to **T1** through **T2**.

At time **T4**, as shown in FIG. **12E**, the fixed-wing aircraft operator controls the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** to contact and capture part of the flexible capture member **5000** extending between the multicopter **10** and the drum **3510**. This begins a payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The impact of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** on the flexible capture member **5000** exerts a force $F_{OPPOSING}$ on the flexible capture member **5000** that exceeds F_{DRUM} , which causes the drum **3510** to spin clockwise (from the viewpoint in FIG. **10D**) and payout the flexible capture member **5000**. As described above, this increases **P1** to (or even above) 850 psi—i.e., the pressure relief valve set point. In the payout phase, **P1** maintains its 850 psi value as of time **T4**. Once the movement of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** has dampened such that $F_{OPPOSING}$ no longer exceeds F_{DRUM} (just before time **T5**), **P1** decreases to 800 psi.

At time **T5**, as shown in FIG. **12F**, the multicopter operator controls the multicopter **10** to descend toward the aircraft-landing structure **8000**, and there is slack in the flexible capture member **5000** extending between the captured fixed-wing aircraft **20a** and the drum **3510**. Accordingly, $F_{OPPOSING}$ is less than F_{DRUM} , and the haul-in phase begins, as described above for time **T0** through **T1**.

At time **T6**, as shown in FIG. **12G**, after the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** has reached and is resting on the aircraft-landing structure **8000**, the multicopter operator controls the multicopter **10** to hover, and $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} . This begins a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process, described above with respect to **T1** through **T2**. The multicopter operator controls the multicopter **10** to land clear of the aircraft-landing structure **8000** and the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**.

The hydraulic system **7300** of the anchor system **3000** is configured to ensure the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** remains atop the aircraft landing structure **8000**. For this to happen, the force F_{DRUM} must be greater than the weight of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a**. In this example embodiment, the

fixed-wing aircraft **20a** weighs about 60 pounds while F_{DRUM} is about 80 pounds in the neutral phase, so the hydraulic system ensures the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** remains atop the aircraft landing structure **8000**.

Additionally, the aircraft landing structure **8000** is sized, shaped, and inflated at a suitable pressure to support the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** without buckling or tipping over to ensure that the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** does not fall to the ground. In this example embodiment, a 0.3 psi inflation pressure is used along with inflatable supports that have 1200 square inch footprints such that each inflatable support can support about 360 pounds without buckling. The fixed-wing aircraft **20a** weighs about 60 pounds, so the inflatable supports are more than able to support the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** even under severe wind loading conditions. For instance, even a 30 mph wind pushing sideways on the aircraft-landing structure would apply a maximum compression of 100 pounds on a leeward inflatable support (assuming 50 pound weights are used to weigh each inflatable support down, as described above). This plus the 60 pound fixed-wing aircraft's weight is well below the 360 pound maximum.

The anchor system **3000** is therefore configured to quickly and automatically modify its operation to regulate the force F_{DRUM} applied to the flexible capture member as the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process switches between the haul-in, neutral, and payout phases.

8. Alternative Hydraulic System

FIGS. 13A-13D illustrate part of a second embodiment of the hydraulic system **7300a** that includes: (1) the electric hydraulic pump **7350**; (2) the accumulator **7352**; (3) a pressure regulator **7354** (such as the Hydraulic Pressure Regulator #9474T11 sold by McMaster-Carr) having an inlet port and an outlet port; (4) the pressure relief valve **7356**; (5) the hydraulic motor **7358**; (6) a check valve **7360** (such as the Super High-Pressure Check Valve #5010K63 sold by McMaster-Carr) having an inlet port and an outlet port; (7) the hydraulic fluid tank **7362**; and (8) the pressure switch **7364**.

The inlet port of the electric hydraulic pump **7350** is in fluid communication with the outlet port of the tank **7362**, and the outlet port of the electric hydraulic pump **7350** is in fluid communication with the inlet/outlet port of the accumulator **7352** and the inlet port of the pressure regulator **7354**. The outlet port of the pressure regulator **7354** is in fluid communication with the inlet port of the pressure relief valve **7356** and the inlet port of the hydraulic motor **7358**. The inlet port of the hydraulic motor **7358** is in fluid communication with the inlet port of the pressure relief valve **7356**. The outlet port of the hydraulic motor **7358** is in fluid communication with the outlet port of the pressure relief valve **7356** and the inlet port of the check valve **7360**. The outlet port of the check valve **7360** is in fluid communication with the inlet port of the tank **7362**. In this embodiment, these components are in fluid communication with one another via suitable flexible tubing (not shown), though any suitable lines, hoses, or tubing may be used to fluidically connect these components. The hydraulic system **7300a** also includes various fittings and connectors (not shown) that facilitate fluidically connecting these components. These fittings and connectors are well-known in the art and are not described herein for brevity.

When electrically connected to a power source and powered on, the electric hydraulic pump **7350** draws hydraulic fluid (such as oil or any other suitable fluid) from the tank

7362 and through its inlet port and pumps the hydraulic fluid out of its outlet port at a pump outlet pressure (800 psi in this example embodiment).

In certain situations, as explained below, the accumulator **7352** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet/outlet and stores hydraulic fluid at a particular pressure to reduce pressure switch chatter (as described below). The accumulator gas charge is preloaded to the pressure switch lower set point (800 psi in this example embodiment, as described below) to minimize pressure switch chatter frequency.

The pressure switch is configured to measure the pressure of hydraulic fluid at the accumulator **7352**. The pressure switch **7364** selectively connects the electric hydraulic motor **7350** to a power source **7400** based on the pressure **P1** of hydraulic fluid at the accumulator **7352**. The pressure switch measures **P1** and: (1) electrically connects the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350** when **P1** is less than the pressure switch lower set point (800 psi in this example embodiment); and (2) electrically disconnects the power source **7400** and the electric hydraulic pump **7350** when **P1** is greater than or equal to a pressure switch upper set point (1,000 psi in this example embodiment). The combination of the accumulator **7352** and the pressure switch **7364** ensures that the electric hydraulic pump **7350** only operates as needed to maintain the pressure of the hydraulic fluid in the accumulator **7352**.

The pressure regulator **7354** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet port. If the pressure of the hydraulic fluid is greater than a pressure regulator set point (800 psi in this example embodiment), the pressure regulator **7354** reduces the pressure of the hydraulic fluid to the 800 psi pressure regulator set point and enables the reduced-pressure hydraulic fluid to exit its outlet port at this precisely tuned pressure regulator set point. If the pressure of the hydraulic fluid received at the inlet port is less than the 800 psi pressure regulator set point, the pressure regulator **7354** enables the hydraulic fluid to flow through it and exit its outlet port without substantially changing the pressure.

The pressure relief valve **7356** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet port and prevents the hydraulic fluid from exiting its outlet port until the pressure of the hydraulic fluid reaches a pressure relief valve set point (850 psi in this example embodiment) that is greater than the 800 psi pressure regulator set point, as described above.

Depending on the scenario, the hydraulic motor **7358** receives hydraulic fluid at either its inlet port from the pressure regulator **7354** or its outlet port from the pressure relief valve **7356**. When the hydraulic motor **7358** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet port from the pressure regulator **7354**, the hydraulic fluid flows through the hydraulic motor **7358** and exits its outlet port. The flow of the hydraulic fluid in this direction causes the output shaft of the hydraulic motor **7358** to rotate in a direction that, as described below, causes the flexible capture member to wrap around the drum **3510**. On the other hand, when excessive force on the flexible capture member forces the drum **3510** to rotate in a manner that enables flexible capture member payout, the hydraulic motor **7358** receives hydraulic fluid at its outlet port from the pressure relief valve **7356**, and the hydraulic fluid flows through the hydraulic motor **7358** and exits its inlet port. The flow of the hydraulic fluid in this direction is intentionally lossy, forming an energy sink for the kinetic energy of the aircraft being captured.

The check valve **7360** receives hydraulic fluid at its inlet port and enables the hydraulic fluid to exit its outlet port, but prevents hydraulic fluid (or air) from flowing from its outlet port to its inlet port. In other embodiments, the tension-

regulating flexible capture member payout and retract device does not include the check valve 7360.

8.1 Flexible Capture Member Haul-in Phase

FIG. 13A is a schematic block diagram of part of the hydraulic system, 7300a during the haul-in phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

During the haul-in phase, initially, the pressure P1 of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator 7352 is below the 800 psi pressure switch lower set point. Accordingly, the pressure switch 7364 electrically connects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to the power source 7400. The electric hydraulic pump 7350 draws hydraulic fluid from the tank 7362 and pumps the hydraulic fluid at the pump outlet pressure to the inlet/outlet port of the hydraulic accumulator 7352 and the inlet port of the hydraulic pressure regulator 7354.

Since at this point the pressure P1 of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator 7352 is less than the 800 psi pressure switch lower set point, the pressure switch 7364 continues electrically connecting the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to the power source 7400 throughout the haul-in phase.

The pressure regulator 7354 enables the hydraulic fluid it receives from the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to flow through it. The hydraulic fluid flows from the outlet port of the pressure regulator 7354 to the inlet port of the pressure relief valve 7356 and the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358. Since the pressure P2 of the hydraulic fluid downstream of the pressure regulator 7354 and upstream of the pressure relief valve 7356 and the hydraulic motor 7358 is less than the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point, the pressure relief valve 7356 prevents the hydraulic fluid from flowing through it.

The hydraulic fluid instead flows from the outlet port of the pressure regulator 7354 to the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358, through the hydraulic motor 7358, and exits the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358. The flow of the hydraulic fluid through the hydraulic motor 7358 in this direction (i.e., from inlet port to outlet port) causes the output shaft of the hydraulic motor 7358 to exert a counter-clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 13A) torque on the drum shaft. This torque imposes a force F_{DRUM} on the flexible capture member 5000 via the drum 3510. Since the force $F_{OPPOSING}$ on the flexible capture member 5000 is less than F_{DRUM} , the torque the hydraulic motor 7358 exerts on the drum shaft causes the drum shaft and the drum 3510 to rotate counter-clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 13A) relative to the anchor system base. This causes the flexible capture member 5000 to wrap around the drum 3510 (and decrease the amount of flexible capture member 5000 extending between the drum 3510 and the multicopter 10).

The hydraulic fluid flows from the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358 to the inlet port of the check valve 7360, and exits the outlet port of the check valve 7360 into the inlet port of the tank 7362.

In this example embodiment, the components and set points are sized, shaped, arranged, set, or otherwise configured such that F_{DRUM} is about 80 pounds during the haul-in phase.

8.2 Neutral Phase

FIGS. 13B and 13C are schematic block diagrams of part of the hydraulic system 7300a during the neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

In the neutral phase, the drum 3510 does not rotate relative to the anchor system base. Even so, hydraulic fluid leaks through the hydraulic motor 7358 and drains through the check valve 7360 and into the tank 7362. The accumulator 7352 eliminates the need to constantly run the electric hydraulic pump 7350 during the neutral phase in response to

this leakage and ensure F_{DRUM} remains constant to regulate the tension in the flexible capture member.

As shown in FIG. 13B, once $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} , the electric hydraulic pump 7350 continues to operate because P1 is less than the 800 psi pressure switch lower set point. But since hydraulic fluid flow through the hydraulic rotor 7358 has been reduced to mere leakage, pressure P1 begins to build and the accumulator 7352 begins charging. As shown in FIG. 13C, once the pressure P1 reaches the 1,000 psi pressure switch upper set point, the accumulator 7352 is charged and the pressure switch 7364 electrically disconnects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 from the power source 7400. The accumulator 7352 begins discharging to replenish the hydraulic fluid leaking through the hydraulic motor 7358. Once the pressure P1 falls below the 800 psi pressure switch lower set point, the pressure switch 7364 electrically connects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 to the power source 7400 to again charge the accumulator 7352. The use of the accumulator 7352 and the pressure switch 7364 therefore ensures that leakage through the hydraulic motor 7358 is accounted for and that F_{DRUM} will not decrease as hydraulic fluid leaks through the hydraulic motor 7358.

In this example embodiment, the components and set points are sized, shaped, arranged, set, or otherwise configured such that F_{DRUM} is about 80 pounds during the neutral phase.

8.3 Flexible Capture Member Payout Phase

FIG. 13D is a schematic block diagram of part of the tension-regulating flexible capture member payout and retract device 7300 during the payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

In the payout phase, $F_{OPPOSING}$ causes the drum 3510 to spin clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 13D) and pay out flexible capture member wrapped around the drum 3510. This clockwise spinning of the drum 3510 forces hydraulic fluid to flow into the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358, through the hydraulic motor 7358, and exit the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358. Since hydraulic fluid cannot enter the outlet port of the pressure regulator 7354, this causes the pressure P2 of the hydraulic fluid downstream of the pressure regulator 7354 and upstream of the pressure relief valve 7356 and the hydraulic motor 7358 to increase. Once the pressure P2 of the hydraulic fluid downstream of the pressure regulator 7354 and upstream of the pressure relief valve 7356 and the hydraulic motor 7358 reaches the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point, the pressure relief valve 7356 enables hydraulic fluid to flow through it. This causes hydraulic fluid to flow from the inlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358 to the inlet port of the pressure relief valve 7356 and from the outlet port of the pressure relief valve 7356 to the outlet port of the hydraulic motor 7358 until the drum 3510 stops rotating clockwise (from the viewpoint of FIG. 13D) and P2 drops below the pressure relief valve set point (850 psi in this example embodiment) (i.e., until $F_{OPPOSING}$ falls below F_{DRUM}).

During the payout phase, hydraulic fluid does not drain to the tank 7362, and the electric hydraulic pump 7350 thus doesn't need to replenish any drained hydraulic fluid. This means that P1 will not drop below the 800 psi pressure switch lower set point, and the pressure switch 7364 electrically disconnects the electric hydraulic pump 7350 from the power source 7400 during most (if not all) of the payout phase.

Accordingly, the relative positioning and configuration of the components of the hydraulic system enable the hydraulic motor to spin in either direction while maintaining torque on

the drum shaft in the desired direction (counter-clockwise in the embodiment show in FIGS. 13A-13D) to maintain F_{DRUM} on the flexible capture member

In this example embodiment, F_{DRUM} is controlled by the pressure relief valve set point (the higher the set point, the higher F_{DRUM}) and friction. In this example embodiment, F_{DRUM} is about 85 pounds during the payout phase.

8.4 Example Fixed-Wing Aircraft Capture Process

FIG. 13E is a graph 7900 of the pressure P1 of the hydraulic fluid at the accumulator 7352 and the pressure P2 of the hydraulic fluid downstream of the pressure regulator 7354 and upstream of the pressure relief valve 7356 and the hydraulic motor 7358 over time during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. For simplicity, in this example embodiment P1 and P2 are assumed to be 0 psi at time T0.

Before time T0, while the electric hydraulic pump 7350 is switched off, the anchor system operator pulls some of the flexible capture member 5000 off of the drum 3510 and attaches the flexible capture member 5000 to the multicopter. Since the flexible capture member is slack between the drum 3510 and the multicopter, $F_{OPPOSING}$ is negligible at time T0.

At time T0, the anchor system operator switches the electric hydraulic pump 7350 on to begin a haul-in phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process to take up the slack in the flexible capture member 5000. Since P1 is 0 psi—i.e., less than the 800 psi pressure switch lower set point—the pressure switch 7364 electrically connects the power source 7400 and the electric hydraulic pump 7350. As described above, the electric hydraulic pump 7350 pumps hydraulic fluid at the 100 psi pump outlet pressure to drive the hydraulic motor 7358 to rotate the drum 3510 counter-clockwise (from the viewpoint in FIG. 13A) and take up the slack in the flexible capture member 5000. P2 and P1 are generally equal in the haul-in phase (though P2 may be slightly lower than P1 due to pressure loss via the tubing and connectors).

At time T1, all of the slack in the flexible capture member 5000 has wound around the drum 3510, and $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} . This begins a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process before multicopter climb. Flow through the hydraulic motor 7358 slows to mere leakage, and electric hydraulic pump 7350 begins charging the accumulator 7352. When P1 reaches 1,000 psi pressure switch upper set point, the pressure switch 7364 electrically disconnects the power source 7400 and the electric hydraulic pump 7350. The accumulator 7352 begins discharging in response to the hydraulic fluid leaking through the hydraulic motor 7358. The pressure switch 7364 continues alternating between electrically connecting and electrically disconnecting the power source 7400 and the electric hydraulic pump 7350 during the neutral phase so P1 alternates between 800 and 1,000 psi. P2 tracks P1 until reaching the 800 psi pressure regulator set point.

At time T2, the multicopter operator begins multicopter climb, which begins a payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The climbing multicopter exerts a force $F_{OPPOSING}$ on the flexible capture member 5000 that exceeds F_{DRUM} , which causes the drum 3510 to spin clockwise (from the viewpoint in FIG. 13D) and payout the flexible capture member 5000. As described above, this increases P2 to (or even above) the 850 psi pressure relief valve set point. In the payout phase, P1 maintains its 1,000 psi value as of time T2. Once the multicopter reaches its desired height (just before time T3), it stops climbing and begins station-keeping. Since $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} , P2 decreases to 800 psi.

At time T3, the multicopter is station-keeping and $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} . This begins a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process, described above with respect to T1 through T2.

At time T4, the fixed-wing aircraft contacts and captures the flexible capture member 5000 extending between the multicopter and the drum 3510. This begins a payout phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. The impact of the fixed-wing aircraft on the flexible capture member 5000 exerts a force $F_{OPPOSING}$ on the flexible capture member 5000 that exceeds F_{DRUM} , which causes the drum 3510 to spin clockwise (from the viewpoint in FIG. 13D) and payout the flexible capture member 5000. As described above, this quickly increases P2 to (or even above) 850 psi—i.e., the pressure relief valve set point. In the payout phase, P1 maintains its 1,000 psi value as of time T4. Once the movement of the fixed-wing aircraft has dampened such that $F_{OPPOSING}$ no longer exceeds F_{DRUM} (just before time T5), P2 decreases to 800 psi.

At time T5, there is slack in the flexible capture member 5000 extending between the captured fixed-wing aircraft and the drum 3510. Accordingly, $F_{OPPOSING}$ is less than F_{DRUM} , and the haul-in phase begins, as described above for time T0 through T1.

At time T6, the fixed-wing aircraft has reached and is resting on the aircraft-landing structure, and $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals F_{DRUM} . This begins a neutral phase of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process, described above with respect to T1 through T2.

The tension-regulating flexible capture member payout and retract device 7300 is therefore configured to quickly and automatically modify its operation to regulate the force F_{DRUM} applied to the flexible capture member as the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process switches between the haul-in, neutral, and payout phases.

8.5 Variations

As generally described above, the sizing and configuration of the components of the hydraulic system along with the different pressure set points result in the example F_{DRUM} for the different phases of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process. One may vary the sizing and configuration of the components or the different pressure set points to achieve a desired F_{DRUM} for the different phases of the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval process.

In various embodiments, a stopper is attached to a suitable position of the flexible capture member between the anchor system and the multicopter. The stopper is sized to not fit through the one of the components of the aircraft-landing structure or one of the components of the anchor system, and therefore partitions the flexible capture member into a portion that can be wound onto the drum (the portion between the drum and the stopper) and a portion that cannot be wound onto the drum (the portion between the stopper and the multicopter). One benefit is that the stopper ensures that a length of slack flexible capture member extends between the multicopter and the anchor system before the multicopter ascends for retrieval, which prevents the anchor system from prematurely pulling on the multicopter. This length of slack flexible capture member also facilitates landing the multicopter after retrieval since the multicopter will not have to fight against any force imposed by the anchor system.

In an alternative embodiment, the hydraulic system is instead an electrically powered winch with a slipping clutch that operates in a manner similar to that of the hydraulic system described above to regulate the tension in the flexible capture member during the fixed-wing aircraft retrieval

process. In this embodiment, the electrically powered winch may include an electric motor having an output shaft, a drive shaft, a slipping clutch, a drum shaft, and a drum. The output shaft of the electric motor is operably connected to the drive shaft in a suitable manner such that the electric motor drives the drive shaft. The slipping clutch, if included, is fixedly attached to and rotatable with the drive shaft. If no clutch is present, the electric motor may be forced to opposite its intended direction. Specifically, a brushed DC motor with a constant current electrical power supply would enable the motor to spin either direction while maintaining torque in the desired direction for purpose of maintaining tension on the spool of flexible capture member.

The drum shaft is mounted to the anchor system base via suitable bearings so the drum shaft can freely rotate relative to the anchor system base. The drum is fixedly attached to and rotatable with the drum shaft. The slipping clutch is positioned adjacent the drum.

In operation, when the electric motor is powered on, the output shaft of the electric motor drives the drive shaft and the slipping clutch, and the slipping clutch transmits torque to the drum and causes the drum to rotate and exert a force F_{DRUM} on the flexible capture member as described above. This continues as long as $F_{OPPOSING}$ is less than F_{DRUM} . Once $F_{OPPOSING}$ equals or exceeds F_{DRUM} , the slipping clutch slips and enables the drum to payout flexible capture member. To dissipate payout energy, the clutch may be configured as an eddy current brake that regulates F_{DRUM} . Since this slipping clutch process generates a substantial amount of heat, a cooling device, such as a blower or fan, may be employed to reduce operating temperatures.

9. Alternative Saddle

FIGS. 14A-14I show part of an alternative embodiment of the saddle 300a and components thereof. The saddle 300a is the portion of the hub module that: (1) the fixed-wing aircraft is attached to and released from to launch the fixed-wing aircraft into free, wing-borne flight; and (2) the flexible capture member is attached to for retrieval of the fixed-wing aircraft from free, wing-borne flight. This embodiment of the saddle 300a is sized, shaped, arranged, and otherwise configured to attach to and release the fixed-wing aircraft 20b without requiring any modification to the fixed-wing aircraft 20b. The size, shape, arrangement, and configuration of the components of the saddle 300a may be modified such that the saddle 300a can attach to and release other fixed-wing aircraft (such as the fixed-wing aircraft 20a).

The saddle 300a includes a saddle base bracket 6310 and first and second saddle side brackets 6312 and 6314 straddling the saddle base bracket 6310. A cross-brace 6318 is connected to and extends between the first and second saddle side brackets 6312 and 6314 near their back ends. As described in more detail below, the front ends of the first saddle side bracket 6312, the second saddle side bracket 6314, and the saddle base bracket 6310 are connected or otherwise mounted to a front engager 6320 such that the front engager 6320 can rotate relative to the first saddle side bracket 6312, the second saddle side bracket 6314, and the saddle base bracket 6310. Although not shown for clarity, the saddle base bracket 6310 is fixedly connected to the hub base via suitable mounting brackets, and the first and second saddle side brackets 6312 and 6314 are fixedly connected to the hub base via suitable fasteners.

As best shown in FIGS. 14B and 14C, the front engager 6320 includes: a shaft 6321; first and second leading-edge engagers 6323 and 6326; sleeve bearings 6322, 6324, 6325, and 6327; and a stabilizer 6328.

The first leading-edge engager 6323 includes a generally triangular base 6323a having a tube 6323c extending therefrom. A shaft-receiving bore (not labeled) extends through the base 6323a and the tube 6323c. The base 6323a defines a contoured leading edge engaging surface 6323b that is shaped to receive and engage the portion of the leading edge of the wing of the fixed-wing aircraft 20b to which the saddle 300a will attach, as described below. The base 6323a includes a plurality of strengthening ribs extending outward from the tube 6323c. Similarly, the second leading-edge engager 6326 includes a generally triangular base 6326a having a tube 6326c extending therefrom. A shaft-receiving bore (not labeled) extends through the base 6326a and the tube 6326c. The base 6326a defines a contoured leading edge engaging surface 6326b that is shaped to receive and engage the portion of the leading edge of the wing of the fixed-wing aircraft 20b to which the saddle 300a will attach, as described below. The base 6326a includes a plurality of strengthening ribs extending outward from the tube 6326c.

As noted above, the front engager 6230 is connected or otherwise mounted to the saddle base bracket 6310 and the first and second saddle side brackets 6312 and 6314 such that the front engager 6320 is rotatable relative to those components. The saddle base bracket 6310 includes a tubular mounting portion 6310a that defines a shaft-receiving bore therethrough. Part of the shaft 6321 is received in the shaft-receiving bore of the tubular mounting portion 6310a such that first and second free ends of the shaft are positioned on opposing sides of the tubular mounting portion 6310a. The shaft 6321 is rotatably fixed relative to the saddle base bracket 6310, though in other embodiments the shaft 6321 may rotate relative to the saddle base bracket 6310. Suitable bearings may be incorporated at the interfaces between the saddle base bracket and the shaft to facilitate rotation of the shaft relative to the saddle base bracket.

The first and second leading-edge engagers 6323 and 6326 are rotatably mounted to the shaft 6321 on opposite sides of the tubular mounting portion 6310a of the saddle base bracket 6310 via the sleeve bearings 6322, 6324, 6325, and 6327. Specifically, the sleeve bearings 6322 and 6324 are press fit into the opposing ends of the shaft-receiving bore through the first leading-edge engager 6323 such that the sleeve bearings 6322 and 6324 cannot rotate relative to the first leading-edge engager 6323. Part of the shaft 6321 is received in the sleeve bearings 6322 and 6324 and the shaft-receiving bore of the first leading-edge engager 6323 such that the first end of the shaft 6321 protrudes from the sleeve bearing 6324. The first end of the shaft 6321 is received in a first retaining element 6329a fixedly attached to the second saddle side bracket 6314. The first retaining element 6329a prevents substantial axial movement of the shaft 6321 relative to the first retaining nub 6329a, and retains the first leading-edge engager 6323 on the shaft 6321. At this point, the first leading-edge engager 6323 is mounted to the shaft 6321 via the sleeve bearings 6322 and 6324 such that the first leading-edge engager 6323 is rotatable about the longitudinal axis of the shaft 6321 relative to the saddle base bracket 6310. The longitudinal axis of the shaft 6321 is above the leading edges of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft 20b.

Similarly, the sleeve bearings 6326 and 6325 are press fit into the opposing ends of the shaft-receiving bore through the second leading-edge engager 6326 such that the sleeve bearings 6326 and 6325 cannot rotate relative to the second leading-edge engager 6326. Part of the shaft 6321 is received in the sleeve bearings 6326 and 6325 and the shaft-receiving bore of the second leading-edge engager

6326 such that the second end of the shaft 6321 protrudes from the sleeve bearing 6325. The second end of the shaft 6321 is received in a second retaining element 6329b fixedly attached to the first saddle side bracket 6312. The second retaining element 6329b prevents substantial axial movement of the shaft 6321 relative to the second retaining element 6329a, and retains the second leading-edge engager 6326 on the shaft 6321. At this point, the second leading-edge engager 6326 is mounted to the shaft 6321 via the sleeve bearings 6326 and 6325 such that the second leading-edge engager 6326 is rotatable about the longitudinal axis of the shaft 6321 relative to the saddle base bracket 6310.

The stabilizer 6328 is attached to the base 6323a of the first leading-edge engager 6323 and to the base 6326a of the second leading-edge engager 6326 such that the stabilizer 6328 extends between and connects the first and second leading-edge engagers 6323 and 6326. The stabilizer 6328 ensures the first and second leading-edge engagers 6323 and 6326 rotate relative to the saddle base bracket 6310 and the first and second saddle side brackets 6312 and 6314 substantially simultaneously rather than independently of one another.

As best shown in FIGS. 14B and 14F, an aircraft attaching/releasing assembly 6340 is attached to the saddle base bracket 6310 and to the front engager 6320 and controls rotation of the first engager 6320 about the longitudinal axis of the shaft 6321 relative to the saddle base bracket 6310. As best shown in FIG. 14F, the aircraft attaching/releasing assembly 6340 includes: a front engager servo motor 6345 having a front engager servo motor shaft 6345a, a front engager arm 6342, a front engager arm lock device 6342a, a servo spacer 6344, first and second nut plates 6347a and 6347b, fasteners 6348 and corresponding nuts 6348a, a front engager rotation control link 6343 having connectors 6343a and 6343b at opposite ends, a lock servo motor 6341 having a lock servo motor shaft 6341a, a lock arm 6346 terminating at one end in a locking extension 6346a, and first and second front engager attachment brackets 6349a and 6349b.

The front engager servo motor 6345 and the lock servo motor 6341 are attached to one another and to the saddle base bracket 6310 via the fasteners 6348, the servo spacer 6344, the first and second nut plates 6347a and 6347b, and the nuts 6348a.

The front engager arm 6342 is attached near one end to the front engager servo motor shaft 6345a and near the other end to the connector 6343a. The connector 6343b is attached to the stabilizer 6328 of the front engager 6320 via the first and second front engager attachment brackets 6349a and 6349b (such as via suitable fasteners, not shown). This operatively links the front engager servo motor shaft 6345a to the front engager 6320. The front engager arm lock device 6342a is attached to the front engager arm 6342 between the connector 6343a and the front engager servo motor shaft 6345a.

The lock arm 6346 is attached to the lock servo motor shaft 6341a near one end. The free end of the lock arm 6346 terminates in the locking extension 6346a, which is engageable to the front engager arm lock device 6342a in certain instances to prevent clockwise (from the viewpoint shown in FIGS. 14G-14I) rotation of the front engager arm 6342.

The front engager servo motor 6345 controls rotation of the front engager 6320 (and, specifically, the first and second leading-edge engagers 6323 and 6326) about the longitudinal axis of the shaft 6321 relative to the saddle base bracket 6310. To rotate the front engager 6320, the front engager servo motor 6345 rotates the front engager servo motor shaft 6345a, which rotates the attached front engager arm 6342,

which in turn rotates the front engager 6320 via the front engager rotation control link 6343. The front engager servo motor 6345 can rotate the front engager 6320 between an attached rotational position—shown in FIGS. 14G and 14H—and a release rotational position—shown in FIG. 14I.

The lock servo motor 6341 controls rotation of the lock arm 6346 between a front engager rotation-preventing rotational position—shown in FIG. 14G—and a front engager rotation-enabling rotational position—shown in FIGS. 14H and 14I. When the front engager 6320 is in the attached rotational position and the lock arm 6346 is in the front engager rotation-preventing rotational position, the locking extension 6346a engages the front engager arm lock device 6342a of the front engager arm 6342. This prevents the front engager servo motor 6345 from rotating the front engager 6320 clockwise (from the viewpoint shown in FIGS. 14G-14I) from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position. As best shown in FIG. 14G, the servo spacer 6344 prevents counter-clockwise rotation (from the viewpoint shown in FIGS. 14G-14I) of the front engager arm 6342.

FIGS. 14G-14I show how the front engager servo motor 6345 and the lock servo motor 6341 cooperate to rotate the front engager 6320 from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position. Initially, the front engager arm 6342 is in the attached rotational position and the lock arm 6346 is in the front engager rotation-preventing rotational position. Here, the locking extension 6346a on the end of the lock arm 6346 engages the front engager arm lock device 6342a of the front engager arm 6342.

Since the locking extension 6346a engages the front engager lock device 6342a of the front engager arm 6342, the front engager servo motor 6345 cannot rotate the front engager 6320 from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position (clockwise from this viewpoint). And as indicated above, the servo spacer 6344b prevents counter-clockwise rotation of the front engager arm 6342 (from this viewpoint).

Rotating the front engager 6320 from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position is a two-step process. As shown in FIG. 14H, the operator first operates the lock servo motor 6341 to rotate the lock arm 6346 into the front engager rotation-enabling rotational position (clockwise from this viewpoint). Second, as shown in FIG. 14I, the operator operates the front engager servo motor 6345 to rotate the front engager 6320 from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position (clockwise from this viewpoint).

As shown in FIG. 14B, separate (but in this embodiment, identical) rear engagers 6360 (here, trailing-edge engagers) are attached to the first and second saddle side brackets 6312 and 6314. As best shown in FIGS. 14D and 14E, the rear engager 6360 includes a body 6362 and a pivotable portion 6364 pivotably connected to the body 6362 via a suitable pivot shaft (not shown). The body 6362 includes a trailing edge engaging surface 6362a. The pivotable portion 6364 includes multiple surfaces that define a trailing edge receiving channel 6364a sized and shaped to receive the trailing edge of a wing of the fixed-wing aircraft 20b. Fasteners 6366 are threadably received in the pivotable portion 6364. The fasteners 6366 engage the top surface of the wing of the fixed-wing aircraft 20b, and can be threaded further into or further out of the pivotable portion 6364 as desired to adjust clearance between the pivotable portion 6364 and the exterior upper surface of the wing. In one embodiment, the fasteners are formed from a relatively soft material, such as

Teflon, and the pivotable portion is formed from a relatively harder material, such as aluminum.

The body **6362** is fixedly attached to the appropriate saddle side bracket via suitable fasteners (not shown for clarity) such that the trailing edge engaging surface **6362a** and the pivotable portion **6364** extend below the body **6362**.

In operation, to launch the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** an operator first attaches the hub module to the fixed-wing aircraft **20b**, assembles the multicopter, hoists the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** using the multicopter and brings it to a desired airspeed, and releases the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** from the multicopter, as generally described above.

For a multicopter including the saddle **300a**, the operator attaches the hub module to the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** by: (1) operating the front engager servo motor **6345** (either manually or remotely via the R/C controller) to rotate the front engager **6320** to the release rotational position; (2) inserting the trailing edges of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** into the trailing edge receiving channels **6364a** of the pivotable portions **6364** of the rear engagers **6360**; (3) positioning the saddle **300a** relative to the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** such that the leading edge engaging surfaces **6323b** and **6326b** of the front engager **6320** are adjacent the leading edges of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b**; (4) operating the front engager servo motor **6345** (either manually or remotely via the R/C controller) to rotate the front engager **6320** to the attached rotational position such that the leading edge engaging surfaces **6323b** and **6326b** of the front engager **6320** contact the leading edges of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b**; and (5) operating the lock servo motor **6341** (either manually or remotely via the R/C controller) to rotate the lock arm **6346a** into the front engager rotation-preventing rotational position so the locking extension **6346a** on the end of the lock arm **6346** engages the front engager arm lock device **6342a** of the front engager arm **6342**.

At this point the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** is attached to the saddle **300a** (and the multicopter) because the front engager **6320** and the rear engagers **6360** engage the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** therebetween. The pivotable portions **6364** of the rear engagers **6360** are rotationally positioned relative to the bodies **6362** of the rear engagers **6360** such that the trailing-edge engaging surfaces **6362a** are not within the trailing-edge receiving channels of the pivotable portions **6364**. The positioning of the servo spacer **6344b** and the fact that the locking extension **6346a** is engaged to the front engager arm lock device **6342a** of the front engager arm **6342** ensure the front engager servo motor **6345** cannot rotate the front engager **6320** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position. This prevents undesired release of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** from the saddle **300a** (and the multicopter).

Releasing the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** from the saddle **300a** while the multicopter is airborne is a two-step process. To release the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** from the saddle **300a** (and the multicopter), the operator first remotely controls the lock servo motor **6341** (via the R/C controller) to rotate the lock arm **6346** into the front engager rotation-enabling rotational position. Second, the operator remotely controls the front engager servo motor **6345** (via the R/C controller) to rotate the front engager **6320** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position. As the front engager servo motor **6345** rotates the front engager **6320** from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position, the first and second leading edge engaging surfaces **6323b** and **6326b** of the front engager **6320** rotate away from and begin to lose contact with the leading edge of the wing

of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b**. As the front engager **6320** continues to rotate clear of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20b**, the pivotable portions **6364** of the rear engagers **6360** enable the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** to freely pivot relative to the saddle base bracket **6310**, the first and second saddle side brackets **6312** and **6314**, and the bodies **6362** of the rear engagers **6360** as gravity pulls the fixed-wing aircraft **20b** downward. The center of gravity of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** is positioned forward of the rear engagers. As this occurs, the trailing edge engaging surfaces **6362a** of the bodies **6362** of the rear engagers **6360** gradually enter the trailing-edge receiving channels of the pivotable portions **6364**. As this occurs, the trailing-edge engaging surfaces **6362a** contact the trailing edge of the wings and force them out of the trailing edge receiving channels, thus releasing the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** from the saddle **300a** (and the multicopter) into free flight.

As the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** rotates downward, its empennage rises relative to the multicopter **10** as the nose of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** drops. The rear engagers are configured such that the trailing edges of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** are forced out of the trailing edge receiving channels before the empennage of the fixed-wing aircraft **20a** contacts one of the rotors of the multicopter **10**.

In another embodiment, the rear engagers include an ejector device (not shown) having an ejector plate movable from a loaded position to an eject position (and vice-versa). The ejector plate is biased to the eject position via a spring or other suitable biasing element. In this embodiment, the act of clamping the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft between the front and rear engagers causes the trailing edges of the wings of the fixed-wing aircraft to contact the ejector plate and overcome the biasing force of the biasing element to move the ejector plate to the loaded position, and hold it there while the wings are clamped. During release, once the front engager rotates clear of the wings, the biasing element moves the ejector plate from the loaded position to the eject position. While this occurs, the ejector plate contacts the trailing edges of the wings and forces them away from the saddle **300a**.

In the embodiment described above with respect to FIGS. **14A-14I**, the leading edge engagers of the front engager rotate in a plane generally parallel to a longitudinal axis of the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft to attach the fixed-wing aircraft to the saddle **300a** and to release the fixed-wing aircraft from the saddle **300a**. In another embodiment, the leading edge engagers of the front engager rotate in a plane generally perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the fuselage of the fixed-wing aircraft to attach the fixed-wing aircraft to the saddle **300a** and to release the fixed-wing aircraft from the saddle **300a**. For example, the free ends of the leading edge engagers may rotate inward, toward the fuselage, to move from the release rotational position to the attached rotational position and may rotate outward, away from the fuselage, to move from the attached rotational position to the release rotational position.

In certain embodiments, the leading-edge engagers (and particularly the leading-edge engaging surfaces) are sized, shaped, arranged, and otherwise configured to force the nose of the fixed-wing aircraft downward during release.

As noted above, this embodiment of the saddle **300a** may be sized, shaped, arranged, and otherwise configured to attach to and release any suitable fixed-wing aircraft by clamping its wings between front and rear engagers. An operator could—without changing any other components of the multicopter—swap out one saddle base bracket, front engager, and rear engager combination (or the entire saddle

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including those components) configured for one type of aircraft with another saddle base bracket, front engager, and rear engager combination (or the entire saddle including those components) configured for a different type of aircraft. This adds yet another layer of modularity to the multicopter and enables it to carry many different types of fixed-wing aircraft without requiring any modification of those fixed-wing aircraft.

Various changes and modifications to the presently preferred embodiments described herein will be apparent to those skilled in the art. These changes and modifications can be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the present subject matter and without diminishing its intended advantages. It is intended that such changes and modifications be covered by the appended claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method of retrieving an aircraft from free flight, the method comprising:

flying a rotorcraft above an anchor system such that a first portion of a flexible capture member connected at one end to the rotorcraft and at another end to the anchor system extends between the rotorcraft and the anchor system;

station-keeping the rotorcraft relative to the anchor system such that the anchor system exerts a first regulated force on the first portion of the flexible capture member; and

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after the aircraft has contacted and captured part of the first portion of the flexible capture member, thereby causing the anchor system to pay out a second portion of the flexible capture member while exerting a second regulated force on the first and second portions of the flexible capture member, descending the rotorcraft toward the anchor system.

2. The method of claim **1**, wherein descending the rotorcraft toward the anchor system causes the anchor system to exert the first regulated force on the first portion of the flexible capture member, thereby causing the anchor system to retract at least some of the first portion of the flexible capture member.

3. The method of claim **1**, further comprising descending the rotorcraft until the fixed-wing aircraft contacts an aircraft-landing structure.

4. The method of claim **3**, further comprising inflating the aircraft-landing structure and positioning the aircraft-landing structure such that the flexible capture member extends through the aircraft-landing structure between the rotorcraft and the anchor system before the aircraft contacts the aircraft-landing structure after the aircraft has captured the part of the first portion of the flexible capture member.

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